

## 1 & 2 Samuel

Originally in the Hebrew Bible, the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings were two books called *Samuel* and *Kings*. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) was the first to divide the books into four books. The Septuagint translators titled these books *1-4 Kingdoms*. That division has persisted ever since. The titles *1-2 Samuel* were given to *1-2 Kingdoms*, while the titles *1-2 Kings* were given to *3-4 Kingdoms* by Jerome in his Latin translation, the Vulgate (late 400s AD). This shows that the original authors, editors, and translators did not see these books as four separate books but rather a closely linked, multi-volume book.

The first word of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers has a prefix—the Hebrew letter *waw*. This is called a *waw-consecutive*, which creates a conjunction with the meaning of “and” or “and the.” This means that they were meant to be read as the sequel to Genesis—and sequentially from there. Conversely, the book of Deuteronomy does not begin with the conjunction *and*, while the books of Joshua through Kings do begin with the conjunction *and*. Thus, Genesis through Numbers are linked together and tell of Israel outside of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is the bridge between Israel not being in the land and Israel being in the land. In the same way, Joshua through Kings are linked together and tell about Israel in the Promised Land. Deuteronomy is the beginning of what scholars call the Deuteronomic History, which includes the books of Deuteronomy through Kings.

Who authored the books of Samuel and when are not known. According to 1 Chr. 29:29, the events of King David’s reign were written in the records of the prophets Samuel, Nathan, and Gad. This shows that the books of Samuel were based on the written accounts of several different prophets. An editor later compiled and organized these writings into one book. Samuel could not have been the author of the book as a whole since his death is recorded in 1 Sam. 25:1 and 28:3. The Hebrew title *Samuel* most likely refers to Samuel not as the author but as the key figure who established the monarchy by anointing Saul and David as the first kings of Israel.<sup>1</sup>

Different parts of the books of Samuel were gathered from different sources into a final narrative story. The final editing was probably made no later than the 900s BC (shortly after the life of David) since 1 Sam. 27:6 states that the city of Ziklag “has belonged to the kings of Judah to this day.” This was not true after the 900s BC.

### Setting

If the Israelite exodus happened in 1446 BC (1 Kgs. 6:1) and they were then in the wilderness for forty years, then Israel would have entered the Promised Land in about 1406 BC. The book of Joshua covers about 35 years of Israel’s history. The book of Judges begins with the death of Joshua (roughly 1360 BC) and covers about 300 hundred years of Israel’s history.

The book of Joshua tells of Israel’s successful conquest of the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. Joshua led Israel in conquering the major cities and subduing the land. There were still many cities left behind to be conquered, but Yahweh had commanded that those be left so that the next generation could conquer them. It was now up to the individual tribes to settle their allotted territory and to finish the conquest of Canaan within their specific boundaries. The book of Judges tells of the following generation’s failure to do so and their eventual

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<sup>1</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p.11.

oppression at the hands of the Canaanites. In His loving faithfulness, however, Yahweh raised up judges to deliver Israel from their enemies who had oppressed them. However, these judges failed as well. The final chapters of the book of Judges contains accounts of gang rape, civil war, and mass slaughter of entire tribes, and the book ends with the statement: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” This conveys the idea that if Israel had the ideal king of Deuteronomy 17:14-20, it would not be in the state of moral decay that it was now in.

The books of Samuel tell how some semblance of law and order was restored through the leadership of Samuel and David. The books of Samuel record Israel’s transition into a monarchy and focuses on David as the true king of Israel.

The first part of 1 Samuel overlaps historically with the end of the Judges period; Samson was born just a few years before Samuel. Samson’s 20-year judgeship began shortly before the battle of Aphek (1104 BC) at which time Eli died (1 Sam. 4:18). Samson died not many years before the battle of Mizpah (1084 BC) when the Philistine domination of Israel ceased temporarily (1 Sam. 7:13). Samuel’s ministry briefly overlapped with the end of Samson’s life. Saul began to reign about 35 years after Samson died (1051 BC).

The books of Samuel cover the period of Israel’s history from the conception of Samuel to the end of David’s reign. Based on chronological references in the text, the birth of Samuel was about 1121 BC. Saul reigned for about 40 years (Acts 13:21), putting the beginning of his reign at 1051 BC. David reigned for about 40 years (2 Sam. 2:11; 5:5), putting the beginning of his reign at 1011 BC. David turned the kingdom over to Solomon in 971 BC. Thus, the books of Samuel cover about 1121-971 BC, or about 150 years of history.

## Structure

The story is told through three central characters: Samuel, Saul, and David. These three are linked to and guided by Yahweh’s purposes, showing that Yahweh is the central figure in the books of Samuel. The books of Samuel are divided into four major divisions, the story of Samuel (1 Sam. 1-8), the reign of Saul (1 Samuel 9-15), the story of Saul and David (1 Sam. 16-31), and the reign of David (2 Sam. 1-24).

The books of Samuel are bookended by two poems. The narrative begins with the song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2) and ends with the song of David (2 Sam. 22) and his last words (2 Sam. 23). There is also a poem of David’s lament for Saul and Jonathan’s death (2 Sam. 1) in the middle of the narrative, which serves as a transitional point between the reign of Saul and the reign of David. These poems establish the major theological themes of the book that the narrative develops.

Hannah’s song sets the stage for the main issues discussed in the books of Samuel with the ideas of raising the weak and bringing down the strong (1 Sam. 2:4-8). This theme is continued on in the transition from 1 Samuel to 2 Samuel, where David’s transition to power is facilitated by the downfall and death of Saul and Jonathan, becoming the pivot for the whole book (2 Sam. 1:17-27). This theme is then balanced by David’s reflections at the end of the book, where he understands that as king he retains power only because of Yahweh’s authority and will (2 Sam. 22:1-23:7).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 38.

## Purpose

The purpose of the books of Samuel is to demonstrate that true human kingship is acknowledging and submitting to the person and will of Yahweh as the ultimate sovereign authority over creation and the nations. Unlike in other nations, being king is not about building and maintaining a political, military, and economically powerful nation but about submitting to the will of Yahweh as His image bearer. If one does this, then Yahweh will build the nation according to His purposes, which will bring greater blessings and meaning than anything a human king could ever create on his own. The purpose of kingship is tied directly to Yahweh's relationship with the king and Israel, which reaches a new level with the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:1-17; 23:1-7).<sup>3</sup> True kingship is obtained when the king in Israel subjects himself to the prophet through whom Yahweh communicates His will. Obedience to the word of Yahweh spoken through the prophet is the necessary condition for a king to be acceptable to Yahweh.<sup>4</sup>

The books of Samuel highlight this purpose through two major events.<sup>5</sup> First is the establishment of the monarchy in Israel (1 Sam. 8-12) under the prophet Samuel. The book begins not with the anointing of Saul as king but with the anointing of Samuel as prophet. The king cannot know the will of Yahweh without the prophet as the mouthpiece of Yahweh. Second is the preparing of David to sit on the royal throne after Saul (1 Sam. 16-31). Saul failed to understand the true purpose of kingship and so was rejected by Yahweh. Yahweh then used the reign of Saul to prepare David to become the kind of king who would submit to the will of Yahweh.

Thus, the second purpose of the books of Samuel is to justify David as Yahweh's king.<sup>6</sup> The narrator contrasts and develops the reigns of Saul and David to demonstrate clearly that David was the king who understood what true kingship was. This point reaches its climax in the Davidic Covenant, where Yahweh established the line of David as kings forever (2 Sam. 7:1-17). However, this is not a story about David as a great man of God, for David's sins were just as great as Saul's, and his actions brought great turmoil to the nation of Israel. Yet where Saul failed to humble himself before Yahweh and justified his sins, David continually demonstrated a desire to know Yahweh and surrender to His will even when he fell under the judgment of Yahweh (2 Sam. 24:11-14).

## Themes

At least three major theological themes stand out in the books of Samuel and develop its purpose that true human kingship is acknowledging and submitting to the person and will of Yahweh as the ultimate sovereign authority over creation and the nations.

### ***The Kingship of Yahweh***

According to the Bible, Yahweh is the King of all creation and created humans as His image that they might rule and subdue under His headship and execute His will on earth. Earthly kingship is a part of the restoration of the rulership that humanity lost in the garden. Therefore, no human king can assume kingship except as the viceroy of Yahweh the divine king (Ex. 15:18; Ps.

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<sup>3</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 73.

<sup>5</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> Klement H. H. *2 Samuel 21-24: Context, Structure, and Meaning in Samuel Conclusion*, p. 252.

29:10).<sup>7</sup> Yahweh's authority is not dependent upon human kingship, but He chooses to operate within its framework.

Hannah states that it is Yahweh who gives power to His human viceroy (the king) and lifts up the horn of His anointed one (1 Sam. 2:10). When Yahweh gave Israel a king (1 Sam. 8:6-9), it was only to be Yahweh's vice regent. The books of Samuel make it clear that Yahweh is the sovereign king over Israel and thus guides the nation and its kings. And apart from Yahweh, Israel's kings have no authority, and He retains authority over the king (2 Sam. 22:1-23:7).

It is Yahweh who brought an end to the corruption of the judges by bringing down the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:27-36). Yahweh was the one who called Samuel to be prophet (1 Sam. 3) in order to prepare Israel for kingship and guide their kings. Even when the people rejected the kingship of Yahweh (1 Sam. 8:1-9), it was He who chose Saul to be king (1 Sam. 9:17-18), rejected Saul as king (1 Sam. 15), and anointed David as king (1 Sam. 16:1-13). And it was Yahweh who held David in check when David began to exceed the limits of His power (2 Sam. 12). Yahweh chooses or rejects people according to His absolute sovereign will (1 Sam. 15:29); Yahweh, not fate, guides the lives of people.

### ***Human Kingship***

Just as there are two points at which Eli is rejected as leader, so there are two points at which kingship is announced in advance of its request (1 Sam. 2:10, 35). The implication is that kingship was Yahweh's design for the next stage of Israel's life. When the narrator presents the people's request for a king (1 Sam. 8:4-5), the issue surrounds what sort of king Israel will have.<sup>8</sup>

Legitimate kingship is initiated by and belongs to Yahweh, yet the people asked for a human king instead of acknowledging Yahweh as their king. This is the conflict generated in 1 Sam. 8-12, over the appropriateness of Saul's rise to kingship. The issue is what type of king will Israel have because the elders of Israel had requested one like all the nations (1 Sam. 8:5), one with the same authority as the surrounding nations. Yahweh would allow them to have the same monarchal structure as the surrounding nations but not the same power as the surrounding monarchies.<sup>9</sup>

The requirements for kingship (1 Sam. 10:25) are found in Deut. 17:14-20. The point of these regulations was to limit the power of the king so as to avoid tyranny and the possibility of his assuming Yahweh's rule over the people. Second, these regulations place upon the king the obligations to be the model Israelite of righteousness and justice.<sup>10</sup>

Saul was raised to power, but he did not submit fully to Yahweh's authority, which resulted in Yahweh's rejection of Saul as king. Saul gradually became more like the king they had been warned of (1 Sam. 8:10-18). Saul was not destined to fail, rather he failed to resolve the ambiguities inherent in his rise.

This led to David as king. Now there were two anointed kings, which allows the narrator to explore what kingship under Yahweh looks like by contrasting the two.<sup>11</sup> After David was

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<sup>7</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> See Patrick D. Miller. *Deuteronomy*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>11</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 44.

anointed as king and on the run from Saul, David had the chance to seize the kingship from Saul on two different occasions (1 Sam. 24; 26). Yet both times he chose to wait on Yahweh to give him the throne. In this David showed that he would not claim power for himself but submit to the sovereignty of Yahweh. Yahweh honored his submission by making his family line kings forever (2 Sam. 7).

David was not perfect (2 Sam. 11-12), and the punishment narratives demonstrate this (2 Sam. 13-20). Even when David abused his power and sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11), he was not brought down fully because he saw that final authority belongs to Yahweh, and he repented and submitted to Yahweh (2 Sam. 12). David is different from Saul in that he accepted Yahweh's right to judge and discipline him, whereas Saul resisted these actions. Thus, David became the model for kingship throughout the book of kings, but even there his faults do not go unnoticed (1 Kgs. 15:4-5).

### ***The Authority of the Prophet***

In the books of Samuel and Kings, the Torah gives no direct guidance to the lives of the kings. Rather, Yahweh's will was primarily known through the prophets. Before Yahweh established the monarchy, He first called Samuel to be the prophet who would guide the monarchy.

The prophetic voice is introduced in Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and the man of God's prophecy (1 Sam. 2:27-36). His message clearly confirms Hannah's song and lays the foundation for Samuel's prophetic ministry (1 Sam. 3:10-14). Samuel's message matched that of the man of God's establishing his prophetic authority, which is confirmed in 2 Sam. 3:19-4:1a.<sup>12</sup>

The prophet is the one who speaks the will of Yahweh to the people. He is the only one who has the right to speak the will of Yahweh to the people because he is the only human who sits on the divine council of Yahweh. In the First Testament, the Holy Spirit did not yet indwell people because Christ's death and resurrection had not yet made this possible. Therefore, if one wanted to speak with Yahweh, he or she had to enter His presence directly. The priests were anointed (chosen) by Yahweh to maintain the tabernacle and the sacrificial system. The kings were anointed by Yahweh to administer Yahweh's will and justice on earth. But only the prophets were anointed by Yahweh to enter His presence, through visions of the divine council of Yahweh. Therefore, the prophets were the only ones who connected to the will of Yahweh and could speak it to the king. As one who knew the will of Yahweh, the prophet also had the authority to enforce the will of Yahweh and to punish its violations. Thus, the prophet was also the guardian of the covenant Law of Yahweh with the people.

These two things were what gave the prophet the authority and insight to anoint kings, guide them, hold them in check, and judge them. Though there were prophets before the time of Samuel, with the establishment of the monarchy, Yahweh chose to also establish the prophets in a more prominent way in Israel. Thus, Samuel became the first of a more permanent office of prophet. As Israel increased in size and power, the number of prophets would grow into a guild in order to guide and hold the nation accountable. In the books of Samuel, only a few prophets are guiding Israel and speaking only occasionally to the kings. In the book of Kings are hundreds of prophets who spoke frequently to the people of Israel. When the kings submitted to the will of Yahweh as spoken through the prophets, then Israel would function as the image of God. But when the kings rejected the prophets, the nation followed, and Yahweh sent more prophets more

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<sup>12</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 46.

frequently to the people to prophecy the coming judgments (Deut. 28) over their violations of the covenant Law.

The authority of the prophet over the king is seen in the fact that it was the prophet who anointed Saul and David, guided each of their steps, and held them accountable when they violated the covenant Law of Yahweh. The king's acceptance of the authority of the prophet was the litmus test of any Israelite leader's authenticity.

## Outline

- I. The Fall of Eli's House and Rise of Samuel as Prophet (1:1-7:17)
  - A. From Hannah's Barrenness to Fertility (1:1-2:11)
  - B. The Contrast Between Samuel and Eli's Sons (2:12-4:1a)
  - C. The Capture of the Ark of the Covenant (4:1b-22)
  - D. Yahweh Returns the Ark of the Covenant to Israel (5:1-7:2a)
  - E. Samuel's Ministry as Israel's Judge (7:2b-17)
- II. Samuel and the Reign of Saul (8:1-15:35)
  - A. Kingship Is Given to Saul (8:1-12:25)
  - B. Kingship Is Removed from Saul (13:1-15:35)
- III. The Reign of Saul and His Conflict with David (16:1-31:13)
  - A. David's Rise as the New Anointed (16:1-17:58)
  - B. David Driven Out by Saul (18:1-20:42)
  - C. Saul Pursues David (21:1-23:29)
  - D. David Spares Two Fools (24:1-26:25)
  - E. David in Philistia and the End of Saul's Reign (27:1-31:13)
- IV. David's Reign and Triumphs (1:1-9:13)
  - A. The Unification of David's Kingdom (1:1-4:12)
  - B. The Establishment of David's Kingdom (5:1-9:13)
- V. David's Reign and Troubles (10:1-20:25)
  - A. David's Sin Against Uriah and Bathsheeba (10:1-12:31)
  - B. David's House in Ruin (13:1-17:23)
  - C. David's Return to the Throne (17:24-20:25)
- VI. A Summary of David's Reign (21:1-24:25)
  - A. The Gibeonites Avenged for Saul's Sin (21:1-14)
  - B. Wars Against the Philistines (21:15-22)
  - C. David's Praise of Yahweh (22:1-51)
  - D. David's Last Words (23:1-7)
  - E. Thirty-Seven Mighty Men (23:8-39)
  - F. David Displeases Yahweh by Taking a Census (24:1-25)

## I. The Fall of Eli's House and Rise of Samuel as Prophet (1:1-7:17)

In the book of Judges, the judges and priests failed to make Yahweh king in Israel and maintain the sanctity of the tabernacle. This continues on into the books of Samuel with the corruption of Eli as judge and priest (1 Sam. 1:3; 4:18) and the wickedness of his sons as priests. This corruption of leadership led to the people being unfaithful to Yahweh and seeing the Ark of the Covenant as a magical talisman to give them victory in battle (1 Sam. 4:3). This climaxes in Israel's losing the Ark of the Covenant. Yahweh used this to judge and bring down the house of Eli, to judge the people, and to demonstrate His sovereignty over all peoples.

At the same time, Yahweh used these events to call Samuel as the new prophet over Israel (1 Sam. 3) to lead them back to covenant loyalty to Yahweh. Samuel as prophet would also establish and guide the monarchy to establish Yahweh's sovereignty over Israel and the surrounding nations.

1 Sam. 1-7 are serial narration, where each episode requires and builds on the episodes that precede it. These chapters tell a fluid story of the end of the house of Eli and the beginning of the prophetic office.

### A. From Hannah's Barrenness to Fertility (1:1-2:11)

The books of Samuel do not begin with the powerful kings of Israel, rather with a relatively obscure family and their experience of worship. The focus is on Hannah, who was childless and oppressed, yet she cried out to Yahweh for deliverance.

The story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel as prophet over Israel is the turning point in Israel's history from the failures of the judges into the renewal of hope under the monarchy. Yet before the monarchy can be introduced, Samuel must be introduced along with why he is so crucial to Israel and its future monarchy. The reader expected the monarchy to begin with Saul, but instead it begins with the family of Elkanah. Monarchy does not begin with a request from the people for a king (1 Sam. 8:4-5) but with Yahweh's actions on behalf of a childless and humble woman. Monarchy begins with the prophet who will guide the monarchy.

Thus, this narrative works on two levels. On one level, it is Yahweh's answer to the prayer of a faithful woman and her faithfulness to honor her vow. But it is also a story preparing for the move to kingship.<sup>13</sup> These two ideas come together in Hannah's prayer (1 Sam. 2:1-10), which is an expression of her deep faith in Yahweh and is filled with the themes of kingship that will be the basis for the rest of the book.

"I Samuel 1 is presented as a conventional birth narrative which moves from barrenness to birth. Laid over that plot is a second rhetorical strategy which moves from complaint to thanksgiving. With the use of this second strategy, the birth narrative is transposed and becomes an intentional beginning point for the larger Samuel-Saul-David narrative.

Hannah's story begins in utter helplessness (silence); it anticipates Israel's royal narrative which also begins in helplessness. As Hannah moves to voice (2:1-10), so Israel's narrative moves to power in the historical process. Both Hannah's future and Israel's future begin in weakness and need, and move toward power and well-being. The narrative of I Samuel 1 functions to introduce the theological theme of 'cry-thanks' which appears in the larger

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<sup>13</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 62.

narrative in terms of Israelite precariousness and Yahweh's powerful providence. Our chapter corresponds canonically to II Samuel 24 which portrays David in the end (like Hannah) as a needy, trusting suppliant. The two chapters, witnesses to vulnerable faith, together bracket Israel's larger story of power.”<sup>14</sup>

**1:1-2** The narrator begins by introducing Elkanah, who was an Ephraimite. The label *Ephraimite* can refer either to those who come from Ephrath (also known as Bethlehem; Gen. 35:19) or to those who come from the northern tribe of Ephraim (Judg. 12:5; 1 Kgs. 11:26).<sup>15</sup> Elkanah may have been from the city of Bethlehem rather than from the tribe of Ephraim. Elkanah was from Ramathaim or Ramah, which was 19 miles west of Shiloh, where the tabernacle was located.

The name Elkanah means “God created.” 1 Chr. 6:22-24 places Elkanah within a Levitical family, though the narrator is not interested in his Levitical background. This would explain how Samuel was able to serve in the tabernacle later since only the tribe of Levi was allowed to serve in the tabernacle (Num. 1:50-53; 3:6-12).

Elkanah had two wives: Peninnah, who had children, and Hannah, who was barren. Yet Elkanah favored Hannah over Peninnah. Hannah means “favor” or “attractive,” and Peninnah means “fruitful.” Hannah’s barrenness makes it seem like she was excluded from Yahweh’s promises of blessing (Ex. 23:25-26; Deut. 7:14). But the story of Hannah draws on familiar themes of favored wives being barren and Yahweh acting to provide a son (Sarah: Gen. 12-21; Rachel and Leah: Gen. 29-30; Manoah’s wife: Judg. 13:2-7). This leads the reader to expect Yahweh to provide a child for Hannah. The fact that Elkanah has multiple wives shows that he was a wealthy man.

**1:3-9a** The families’ yearly travel to and worship at the tabernacle in Shiloh are not associated with the three main pilgrim festivals to the tabernacle (Deut. 16:1-17), so this was their private practice. This shows that he was a devout man who made it a point to travel to the tabernacle in Shiloh to make sacrifices every year.

This is the first time the title “Yahweh of hosts” is used in the Bible. The word is a military word that refers to an army. The title “Yahweh of hosts” is used in the Bible to refer to the angelic army of Yahweh. From this point on, it will become a major title used in the Bible when Yahweh fights on behalf of His people.

In 1 Sam. 1:7, the tabernacle is referred to as a “house” (*bayith*), while in 1 Sam. 1:9 it is referred to as a “temple” (*heykal*). This has led some scholars to believe that the tent tabernacle had been replaced by a temple in Shiloh. The problem with this is that in 1 Sam. 7:6, Yahweh said He had never lived in a house before the time of David. It would not be strange to refer to the tabernacle as a “house” or “temple” since that was how it functioned. There is no evidence in the biblical text that this “temple” at Shiloh was made of stone. The term “house” in this verse simply refers to a dwelling place, without reference to its material; on the other hand, the “house” in the context of 2 Sam. 7:6-7 refers to the “house of cedar,” that is, a wooden shrine surrounded by a stone structure. The reference to “the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (1 Sam. 2:22) rather suggests that the central part of the house of Yahweh at Shiloh was in fact made of cloth. It may

<sup>14</sup>Walter Brueggemann, “I Samuel 1: A Sense of a Beginning,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 102:1 (1990): 48.

<sup>15</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 107.

be that a more stable structure was built around the tent-shrine.<sup>16</sup> *Bayith* (“house”) sometimes refers to a tent. The term *heykal* (“temple”) definitely refers to a large structure. It could refer to a large tent structure.

The parenthetical statement of Eli and his two sons serving at the tabernacle in Shiloh foreshadows the fact that these two families would be connected in a major way in the chapters to come.

One of the ways Elkanah showed favor to Hannah was by giving her a double portion of meat from the yearly sacrifices, even though she had no children to feed. Peninnah would torment Hannah to the point of tears. Though Hannah is favored by her husband, the narrator creates sympathy for Hannah when he calls Peninnah “her rival” and repeats the fact that Hannah was barren (1 Sam. 1:2, 5). Though Hannah comes from a wealthy family, she is portrayed as a lowly and persecuted woman.

The book of Judges ended with the oppression of women by men. Here, the books of Samuel begin with the oppression of a woman by another woman. Yet just as Yahweh used the women of the book of Judges in a powerful way to accomplish His purposes, so too would He lift Hannah to accomplish His purposes.

Though Elkanah is portrayed as a devout man who loved Hannah, his attempts to comfort Hannah seem self-centered and empty. His lack of true sympathy toward her struggle and sorrow led her eat, drink, and go to the tabernacle to share her pain with Yahweh in the tabernacle, who would comfort and respond to her in her sorrow.

**1:9b** Eli the priest is introduced as sitting on his “chair” in the tabernacle. The word “chair” comes the Hebrew word *kissē*, which means “royal seat” or “throne,” giving Eli a royal allusion (1 Kgs. 7:5). A chair was seen as a sign of honor in a culture where people mostly sat on the floor. Eli’s priestly role has overtones of royalty, which carries a negative tone in light of the fact that he is sitting in the tabernacle of Yahweh, the true king. This and the way he conducted himself with Hannah prepares the reader for the negative evaluation of Eli that is yet to come (1 Sam. 2:27-26; 3:16-18).<sup>17</sup>

**1:10-11** Hannah’s prayer to Yahweh is similar to many complaint Psalms, where Yahweh is both the cause of the problem and the one who can bring salvation (Ps. 88). Yet her faith drove her to Yahweh for answers. Hannah vowed to Yahweh that if He gave her a child, she would dedicate the child to serve Yahweh all the days of his life. Vows like this were allowed in the Law (Deut. 23:21-23; Num. 30) as long as one was committed to honoring the vow. Unlike Jephthah (Judg. 11:29-40), Hannah did not make her faith in Yahweh conditional upon His honoring her request. The important point is that the child be dedicated to Yahweh; the vow was the means by which she pleaded with Yahweh.

Hannah may have dedicated her child to be a Nazirite. A Nazirite vow was a covenant that an individual could make to dedicate himself to Yahweh for a temporary amount of time (Num. 6:1-6). The person was not allowed to drink anything from the vine (fermented or not), go near anything dead, or cut his or her hair. The growing of the hair was the public sign of the covenant

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<sup>16</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>17</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 56.

with Yahweh. Her mentioning only the hair would have been a way of referring to the whole covenant since the hair was the visible sign of the Nazirite vow.

**1:12-18** When Eli saw Hannah's mouth moving but heard no words, he assumed she was drunk. Eli made no effort to confirm his interpretation of Hannah by speaking to her or asking her questions before he rebuked her. And although Eli was a priest, he could not recognize a sincere and devout prayer, even in the tabernacle. Eli was out of touch with his people as he sat and watched, doing nothing, where Hannah went to the tabernacle and sought Yahweh. Eli was overweight and living off of the work of other people (1 Sam. 2:12-15, 29; 5:18), much like Eglon (Judg. 3:15-18).

Hannah protested that she was not a woman of wickedness nor drunk but was just praying. The phrase “wicked” in most translations comes from the Hebrew word *belial*. The etymology of *belial* is unclear. It may be a combination of “no” and “profit.” It could mean “worthless” or “destruction.” It is a common term for someone of doubtful moral character (Judg. 19:22; 20:13) and is a highly derogatory label. *Belial* could mean that one’s actions brings them to destruction in the underworld. The phrase *bat beliyā’al* is an archaic phrase meaning “daughter of Beliya’al,” which refers to the Queen of the underworld, like Eresh-ki-gal of the Mesopotamian tradition. Sometimes Sheol (a feminine noun) the Hebrew word for the grave is personified (Prov. 1:12) but there is no evidence of it as a deity. In other words, the expression “to deliver up someone to the presence of Beliya’al’s daughter” is an idiom which means “to bring someone for judgment by Beliya’al’s daughter,” that is, “to destroy someone utterly.”<sup>18</sup> This phrase appears 27 times in the First Testament, nine of those in Samuel (1 Sam. 2:12; 10:27; 25:17, 25; 30:22; 2 Sam. 16:7; 20:1; 22:5; 23:6). In 2 Sam. 22:5, the term is used in parallel to death.

The irony is that Eli’s sons will later be called this by the narrator (1 Sam. 2:12). Eli could only see worthlessness in those distant from himself. Eli blessed Hannah so quickly, without consulting Yahweh and without apology, that it feels ingenuine. Hannah left greatly encouraged from her time praying to Yahweh, even though there was no material change in her circumstances.

A key element of the blessing is the introduction of the root word *sha’al* in 1 Sam. 1:17, which commonly means “to ask” or “enquire” (Judg. 5:25; 1 Kgs. 3:10; Ps. 122:6). It is used two times here and increases in use in the rest of the chapter (1:20, 27 [2x], 28 [2x]), becoming a theme in the books of Samuel. This root is also the basis of Saul’s name.<sup>19</sup>

**1:19-20** The birth account is almost matter of fact, as if it was expected that Yahweh would answer her prayer. The fact that Yahweh remembered her does not mean He had previously forgotten Hannah; rather, the Hebrew term means to act upon a previous commitment to a covenant promise (Gen. 8:1; 9:14-15; 19:29; 30:22; Ex. 2:24; 6:5; 32:13; 1 Sam. 1:19; Judg. 16:28; Ps. 8:4; 9:12; 74:1-3; 98:3; 105:8; 106:45; 111:5; Jer. 15:15). Yahweh’s remembering always implies His movement toward the object or person and shows His trustworthiness in His word.

Hannah named the boy Samuel because she asked Yahweh for him. The name *Samuel* does not literally mean “asked of God” by etymology of the word but relates to the Hebrew verb *sha’al* by

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<sup>18</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 52. And David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, pp. 122-124.

<sup>19</sup> David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 57.

paronomasia, which means the name Samuel sounds like the Hebrew word *sha'al*. This continues the theme of the word “ask” in the books of Samuel.

**1:21-23** Though the boy had been birthed, he was not ready to survive on his own without his mother. Hannah told her husband that she would take Samuel to the tabernacle once he had been weaned. Children were not weaned until about three years old (2 Maccabees 7:27). The fact that Elkanah did not override her vow (Num. 30:6-15) shows that he agreed with the vow.

**1:24-28** The narrator stating that Hannah brought both her sacrifice and Samuel to Eli in the tabernacle shows Hannah’s faithfulness to her vow and that she initiated this. This is also seen in the fact that she did all the talking with Eli. Again, the root *sha'al* (“to ask”) is emphasized in Hannah’s statement that Yahweh had given her the “request I requested of Him.” The narrative ends in worship, which prepares for Hannah’s song.

There are similarities between Samson’s mother (Judg. 13) and Hannah. Both were barren, both dedicated their children as Nazirites, and their children would become judges in Israel (1 Sam. 7:15-17). However, important differences set Hannah and Samuel apart as ones who would actually accomplish Yahweh’s will for them. Unlike Samson’s mother, Hannah sought Yahweh in prayer, knew who Yahweh is, initiated the dedication of her son, and named Samuel as a testimony to Yahweh’s faithfulness. This faithfulness on Hannah’s part continues to show that the time period of the judges was over.

**2:1-3** Hannah responds to Yahweh’s faithfulness with a hymn to Yahweh. The song is not so much a thanksgiving for the son as it is a hymn to the sovereign Yahweh emphasizing His ultimate Kingship. This song is often compared to Ps. 113, which has the same focus of Yahweh as sovereign King. Hannah’s song is an application of the theme that Yahweh works for the poor and the oppressed, a theme that resonates through the rest of Samuel. She acknowledged that it was Yahweh who had changed her situation.

Hannah begins by rejoicing in Yahweh because He lifted her horn high. Yahweh will raise the “horn,” a symbol of authority and power, for the king just as He did for her (1 Sam. 2:1, 10). Even the powerful need to be raised by Yahweh. The kingship and military language that Hannah used in this hymn shows that she saw her oppression at the hands of Peninnah within the larger picture of the nation of Israel and its oppression. Israel will be delivered by Yahweh because there is none like Him and He is their Rock.

The idea of Yahweh as Israel’s Rock was first seen in Ex. 17:4-6 when Yahweh provided water for the Israelites in the wilderness after their deliverance from Egypt. The metaphor of the rock is used throughout the First Testament as a metaphor of Yahweh’s power, protection, provision, and care for His people. Yahweh is continuously called the Rock (Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 18, 30-31; 2 Sam. 2:2; 22:32, 47; 23:3; Ps. 18:2; 19:14; 27:5; 28:1; 31:2, 3; 40:2, 9; 62:2, 6, 7; 71:3; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1; Isa. 17:10; 26:4; 30:29; 44:8; Hab. 1:12). There are also several places where the authors of the Bible remind Israel of what Yahweh had done for them in Ex. 17:5-6, making this a significant act of Yahweh’s provision in Israel’s history (Deut. 8:15; 32:51; Ps. 78:15, 16, 20; 105:41; 114:8; Isa. 32:2; 48:21). In the First Testament, Yahweh also referred to Himself as a “spring of living water” (Isa. 44:3-4), and He stated that His Spirit was like water that He would pour out on His people (Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28, 29; Zech. 12:10-13:1).

In the Second Testament, Christ alluded to himself as being the rock—in the parable of the two builders (Matt. 7:24-27 [Lk. 6:46-49])—and told Peter that He would build the church on

Himself as the rock (Matt. 16:18). Finally, Paul and Peter both explicitly state that Christ is not only the Rock but the very rock of Ex. 17:5-6 (Rom. 9:33; 1 Cor. 10:4; 1 Pet. 2:8). He was deliberately connecting Christ to this event in Israel's history and the theological concept of Yahweh as the Rock of Israel. The Second Testament also refers to water as symbolic of the Holy Spirit, and it was Christ who brought this. (Matt. 3:16 [Mk. 1:10]; Jn. 3:5; 4:10, 13-14; 7:37-39; Eph. 5:26; Heb. 10:22; 1 Jn. 5:6). The Bible also makes clear that water baptism is a symbol of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11 [Mk. 1:8; Jn. 1:26]; Jn. 1:33; Acts 1:5; Rom. 6:3-4; 1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Pet. 3:21).

**2:4-5** Hannah states two role reversals with the imagery of, first, warriors falling while the weak gain strength and, second, the wealthy lacking food while the hungry have food. Structurally, the first two reversals prepare the reader for the third, which is specific to Hannah.

**2:6-8** Yahweh as the sovereign King of creation is the only one who holds life and death in His hands and therefore is the only one who can truly reverse the situations of those in creation. These things do not just happen; they are Yahweh's actions for the weak and the poor. This is a theme grounded in creation (Ps. 96:7-13), and though Hannah was not financially poor, she suffered with the poor in her inability to have children.

**2:9-10** Yahweh, who sends thunder from heaven (1 Sam. 7:10), is the one who overcomes all foes because all of creation is under His power. Again, creation themes are woven into the song of a woman who has only just now been able to fulfill the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28).

The climax of this is revealed in the last two lines of the song. Yahweh will judge the ends of the earth, but He will do it through the king, exalting the "horn" of His anointed. It is Yahweh who gives power to His human deputy (the king) and lifts up the horn of His anointed one just as He had done for Hannah (1 Sam. 1:1). This song, and especially the idea of Yahweh anointing and lifting a lowly person to become His representative king (image of God), is the basis for the rest of the books of Samuel. The king who understands this will be lifted up, while the one who does not will fall. Yahweh is not like the other gods; therefore, Israel could not have a king like the other nations. At this point, the reader does not know who the king will be, but Judg. 17-21 has prepared the readers for the likelihood of kingship.

"Israel's request for a king in 8:5 will not take Yahweh by surprise, because kingship is indicated here. But Israel knows that their king cannot be like the surrounding nations, because Yahweh's king must understand the paradox that real authority comes from yielding power to Yahweh. Hannah's situation has thus become a paradigm through which we read Samuel, remembering that power belongs to Yahweh alone and that seeking power is the way to lose it (see Mark 8:35)."<sup>20</sup>

**2:11** The story of the birth of Samuel ends with Elkanah and Hannah returning to their home and Samuel serving Yahweh, not Eli the priest. This sets the reader up for the next section, where the righteousness of Samuel will be contrasted with the wickedness of Eli's house.

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<sup>20</sup> David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 61-62.

## B. The Contrast Between Samuel and Eli's Sons (2:12-4:1a)

Now that Samuel was serving under Eli, there is an interchange between Samuel and Eli's sons, where the narrator contrasts the righteousness of Samuel with the wickedness of Eli's sons. Not only was Eli a priest, but he was also a judge in Israel (1 Sam. 4:18). Eli's passiveness and corruption continues the theme of the decline of the judges seen in the book of Judges. Eli's sons are portrayed as corrupt like their father; this brings an end to the house of Eli via the judgment of Yahweh so that the lowly Samuel can be lifted up as the leader who will prepare the way for monarchy.

1 Sam. 2:11-36 functions as a pivot from 1 Sam. 1:1-2:10 to 1 Sam. 3:1-21, concluding Samuel's birth narrative and preparing for the coming events of monarchy. There are two references to kingship and two references to the destruction of Eli's family, though the climax of 1 Sam. 3 rests on Eli's acceptance of this.

1:1-2:10	2:11-36	3:1-4:1a
Joy at Samuel's birth	Destruction of the house of Eli	Destruction of the house of Eli
Origins of monarchy	Origins of monarchy	Vindication of Samuel

The interchange begins with the joyous arrival of Samuel and ends with the rise of Samuel. In the middle is the end of the old order of the judges and the origins of the monarchy. These interchanging motifs drive home the main themes: Israel was moving toward monarchy, not the house of Eli, and Samuel was central in Yahweh's purposes in achieving it.<sup>21</sup>

**2:12-14** The narrator begins by referring to Eli's “sons of Belial”—the same thing Hannah told Eli she was not (1 Sam. 1:16). What makes their wickedness so vile is that they were the priests of Yahweh in charge of maintaining the holiness of the tabernacle and yet they had no regard for Yahweh, the sovereign King over creation whom they were serving. The corruption of the judges and priests in the book of Judges comes together in the house of Eli.

The narrator describes the first sinful practice of the priests at this time. The priests would take the people's sacrificed meat, boil it, and then put their fork into the pot, taking whatever came out. This shows the corruption of the priesthood at this time for there is no indication in the Bible that this practice was acceptable. Lev. 3 and 7 makes it very clear which parts of the animal were to be offered to Yahweh and which parts the priests were allowed to take (Deut. 18:3). This pattern of behavior refused to accept Yahweh's provision and claimed more for themselves while denying the worshipers their portion.<sup>22</sup>

**2:15-17** The second sinful practice was that the priests not only claimed an excessive portion of the sacrifice, but they also took it before it had been offered to Yahweh. The priests who were supposed to know the rules of sacrifice were engaging in ordinary behavior that shocked even the ordinary worshiper.<sup>23</sup> As priests, they did not know Yahweh relationally but were serving themselves (1 Sam. 3:7).

The narrator's statement that these actions were sinful in the sight of Yahweh shows why Hophni and Phineas were considered “sons of Belial.” Here, the priests are called *na'ar* (“young men”)

<sup>21</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> See J. P. Fokkelman. *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, p. 119.

<sup>23</sup> David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 156.

even though they were not young men. This description does not excuse them; rather, it belittles them. Their linguistic demotion prepares for their greater demotion by the end of 1 Sam. 2.<sup>24</sup>

**2:18-21** In contrast, Samuel is a *na 'ar* who is serving before Yahweh. With the demotion of Hophni and Phineas, Samuel being called a *na 'ar* is shown to be their social equal and even more righteous. Samuel is said to be wearing a linen ephod, a vest worn by the priests when serving in the tabernacle. Samuel's work is undefined though clearly priestly in nature.

Every year Samuel's mother made and brought him a *me 'il* ("robe") when she came for the annual sacrifices. This first mention of the *robe* will become a theme in the books of Samuel as a symbol of authority (1 Sam. 15:27; 18:4; 24:4-5, 11; 28:14; 2 Sam. 13:18-19; 15:32). Hannah sacrificed to Yahweh, then gave to Samuel and Samuel received, whereas Eli's sons took. Because of Hannah's faithfulness, Yahweh blessed her with more children. This will be contrasted later with the death of Eli's sons under the judgment of Yahweh.

**2:22-26** Not only were Hophni and Phineas stealing from Yahweh and the people, but they were also having sex with the women serving in the tabernacle. The fact that Eli had to hear about their corruption from others rather than observing it himself shows how blind he was to his own sons' character. Eli's blindness is not introduced until 1 Sam. 3:2, which says only that his eyes had begun to grow dim, so this is not an excuse.

Even when Eli confronted his sons, he did not rebuke them directly but rather asked a series of questions that expressed his disappointment. His concern was for what might be lost if their behavior continued. Eli's first question assumed the correctness of the reports. He never asked them what they were doing, which means their behavior was not surprising to him. This reveals Eli to be a greater failure since he was also a judge over the people and was meant to deliver them (1 Sa. 4:18). Eli is like Jacob, a passive father who never disciplined his sons (Gen. 34). Eli understood that the priests were the mediators for the people but that there was no mediator for the priests when they sinned directly against Yahweh. This sets the reader up for Yahweh's judgment that is to come.

Eli's rebuke was too late and too empty, and so the sons did not change. They also did not change because it was too late for them and Yahweh had already decided to judge them. Yahweh does not gain pleasure from the death of the wicked; rather, the path they chose was the path of death.

In contrast to Hophni and Phineas, Samuel continued to grow in the favor of Yahweh and with the people of Israel.

**2:27-29** The irony here is that the priests, who were supposed to be righteous men of Yahweh, needed a man of God (a common phrase used to refer to a prophet) to come and speak to them (1 Kgs. 13). Here, Yahweh spoke for the first time in the books of Samuel, and it was a message of judgment.

Yahweh's first question (1 Sam. 2:27) invited Eli to agree with Yahweh, that his tribe and family had been chosen to be the priests of Israel and thus to be drawn into the prophetic message. The second two questions (1 Sam. 2:29) announced the problem of Eli's house scorning the sacrifices of the tabernacle with their sin, based on the shared understanding of their election as priests to maintain the righteousness of the tabernacle. There was no direct accusation from Yahweh, for

<sup>24</sup> See H. W. Hertzberg. *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, p. 35.

He knew that Eli knew what they were doing was sinful. Eli honored his sons more than Yahweh by knowingly eating of the stolen sacrificial meat and not disciplining his sons. This is probably why he was overweight (1 Sam. 4:18). The Hebrew word *kabad* means “honor” or “heavy,” and this word will become very important in 1 Sam. 4-6. Eli had “honored” (*kabad*) his sons over Yahweh and had become “heavy” (*kabad*) (1 Sam. 4:18) as a result.

**2:30-34** The man of God shifted from asking rhetorical questions to making a direct announcement of judgment. Eli’s house had had the chance to be priests forever, but they had now lost that privilege. Yahweh honors those who honor Him and curses those who despise Him. This will be another theme developed in the books of Samuel. Yahweh announced that He would cut off the house of Eli so that not one person would live long enough to see old age. Those who did live would experience failing eyesight and have grief in their life, and many would die of violence. The point was not the family’s total obliteration rather its exclusion from the blessings of Yahweh and no one to grow old. Every prophecy that is given must have a sign that is immediately fulfilled in order to validate the long-term prophecy. The sign that the man of God gave here was that Hophni and Phineas would die on the same day.

**2:35-36** With the death of Eli’s house, Yahweh announced that He would raise up a house of faithful priests who would do His will. Yahweh would then establish his house forever as a lasting family line serving Yahweh. In addition, those left alive in the house of Eli would serve the house of the faithful priesthood. Yahweh is opposed to religious authority, even those acting in His name, when it is corrupt. Yahweh is committed to the establishment of leadership that is faithful to Him and true to His character. The immediate fulfillment of this prophecy was found in Samuel, but the ultimate fulfillment is found in the Zadokites (1 Kgs. 2:27), who displaced Abiathar.

**3:1** 1 Sam. 3 begins to tie together the strands developed so far in 1 Sam. 1-2 and is the transition from the house of Eli to Samuel. The name Samuel appears in the chapter 24 times. For the first time, he becomes the major figure, though Eli is still prominent for a little bit longer (his name is mentioned 17 times). Samuel was already serving as a priest, but now he was about to be called into the office of prophet.

Once again Samuel is called a *na ‘ar* (“young man”) serving before Yahweh. The narrator makes it clear that under the house of Eli, the word of Yahweh and visions were rare. This sets the reader up for the importance and uniqueness of the vision Samuel would receive. Dreams are focused on what is seen and heard while one is sleeping (Gen. 28:12-15; 40:9-11, 16-17; 41:1-7) and are a lower form of divination. Visions are experienced while one is awake. The Hebrew word *dābār*, which means “word,” appears in 1 Sam. 3:1 and then not again until Samuel is to know Yahweh (1 Sam. 3:7). After this it occurs 14 times, emphasizing the abundance of the word of Yahweh because of Samuel’s prophetic ministry. From this point on, Samuel knows Yahweh and thus is equipped for his role as prophet.<sup>25</sup> The narrator moves from a shortage of the word of Yahweh to an abundance, all centered on Samuel.

**3:2-3** Eli is not called a priest, hinting at the fulfillment of the word of the man of God (1 Sam. 2:27-36), because priestly language was no longer appropriate for Eli.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the failing eyes of Eli, the lamp of Yahweh was still burning into the night. It seems that Samuel was

<sup>25</sup> See D. W. Wicke. “The Structure of 1 Samuel 3: Another View,” p. 258.

<sup>26</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 76.

sleeping in the main room of the sanctuary, close to the Ark of the Covenant. In contrast, Eli is in a room attached to the sanctuary. This is the first time that the Ark of the Covenant is mentioned in the books of Samuel, preparing the reader for it to become the focus of 1 Sam. 4-7.

**3:4-9** That night Yahweh called Samuel, but because Samuel was a *na 'ar* (“young man”), he did not recognize the voice of Yahweh (1 Sam. 3:7). Thinking it was Eli calling him, he went to Eli. Eli told Samuel that he did not call him and to go back to sleep. The fact that this happened a second time shows how spiritually disconnected Eli was from Yahweh, that he did not know it was Yahweh speaking in His own house, the tabernacle. The third time, Eli finally figured out that it was Yahweh speaking and instructed Samuel to respond by stating he was listening as Yahweh’s faithful servant.

**3:10-14** Yahweh called to Samuel again, and this time Samuel responded appropriately. Yahweh told Samuel that He was going to do something so great it would cause all those in Israel to talk about it. Yahweh was about to act against Eli, and it would shock all who heard since they considered the priest’s position as inviolable. “Tingling ears” is a shock metaphor and always indicates bad news (2 Kgs. 21:12; Jer. 19:3). Yahweh would see it to completion, carrying out everything He said He would because there was no sacrifice for the sins of the house of Eli.

**3:15-18** The next morning Samuel awoke, and he, not Eli, opened the doors of the sanctuary to the public. The significance of this action is that it was now through Samuel that the doors of Yahweh’s house were open to the people of Israel to hear the word of Yahweh.

Samuel was afraid to tell Eli the message. But Eli told him to tell him everything. Eli accepted the message, knowing that Yahweh had spoken and there was nothing he could do to oppose the fulfillment of Yahweh’s word. Yahweh would do what was right in His eyes after the long years of Israel and Eli’s house doing what was right in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25).

**3:19-4:1a** Samuel was no longer a *na 'ar* (“young man”). From this point on, Yahweh was with Samuel and He did not let any of the words of Samuel go unfulfilled throughout his life (Josh. 21:45; 23:14). Whatever Samuel did from this point on was the will of Yahweh. “From Dan to Beersheba” is a way of saying “in all of Israel” since Dan was the northernmost city and Beersheba was the southernmost city in Israel. Samuel was now the official prophet of all of Israel and was to be trusted as the word of Yahweh (Deut. 18:22). The scarcity of the word of Yahweh had been overcome by Samuel as the prophet of Yahweh. And the vision no longer is mentioned, only Yahweh continued to appear to Samuel.

### C. The Capture of the Ark of the Covenant (4:1b-22)

After spending so much time establishing Samuel as prophet, he is not present in 1 Sam. 4:1b-7:2a. This illustrates the spiritual darkness of Israel in that the Word of Yahweh was in abundance through Samuel, yet the people did not seek him out. Even so, this section is an outworking of his prophetic message of the fall of the house of Eli and the great thing Yahweh was going to do in Israel (1 Sam. 2:27-36).

This section shows that the people of Israel were in the same place spiritually as the house of Eli. The spiritual ignorance and idolatry climax in the people treating the Ark of the Covenant as a magical talisman and then losing it. The Ark of the Covenant then becomes the central focus. The Ark of the Covenant narrative draws on themes found in Exodus. The Ark of the Covenant enters a pagan nation, where Yahweh attacks their god and brings a plague on the people for their idolatry. The people then demand that the Ark of the Covenant be sent home, even referencing the plagues of Egypt (1 Sam. 6:6). Then the Ark of the Covenant exits Philistine territory and returns to the Promised Land.

**4:1b-2** The Philistines had been in the land of Canaan since Abraham's day (Gen. 21:32). However, a large group of people called the Sea Peoples migrated from the Aegean Sea region (Amos 9:7) in about 1230 BC (during the time of the judges) and settled the coastal plains of Canaan. These people majorly oppressed Israel during the time of Samson and Samuel until David finally put them down.

The Philistines had moved their forces 25 miles into Israelite territory. Israel fought them but were defeated, losing many men. The Hebrew word *'elep* can mean “thousands,” “clans” (1 Sam. 10:19; 23:23), or “military units.”<sup>27</sup> Here, it most likely describes four military units rather than “thousands.”<sup>28</sup>

The narrator is not interested in the cause or the details of the battle, only that Israel was defeated. The reason for Israel's defeat is also not mentioned because after reading the book of Judges it is obvious by now that the reason is idolatry (Ps. 78:56-66). What the narrator is interested in is how Israel responded to the defeat and their attitude towards Yahweh.

**4:3-4** The elders of Israel were confused as to why they had lost, as it had never occurred to them that it was because of their idolatry. What is sad is that the elders are the ones asking this question. Their answer was to bring the Ark of the Covenant from Shiloh so that it might give them victory. “Take” is the key word in this narrative (1 Sam. 4:3, 11, 17, 19, 21, 22; 5:1, 2; 6:8). The narrator is communicating the idea that the people were treating the Ark of the Covenant as a sacred object that would grant them military victory. The covenant people had lost their understanding of the presence of Yahweh.<sup>29</sup> The worst part is that they never went to Yahweh to wait on Him (Judg. 17-21).

There is no mention of the Israelites marching out at Samuel's command. Though the word of Yahweh through Samuel was recognized throughout Israel, the people went out to battle without seeking the will of Yahweh through His prophet.

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<sup>27</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 189.

<sup>28</sup> See J. W. Wenham. “Large Numbers in the Old Testament.”

<sup>29</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 190.

The fact that Hophni and Phinehas are specifically mentioned as coming back with the Ark of the Covenant to a battlefield where people had died sets the reader up for the fulfillment of Yahweh's judgement that Hophni and Phinehas were going to die on the same day (1 Sam. 2:34).

There are three surprising omissions from the time period of the judges. The reason for the people's oppression is not given, the people did not cry out to Yahweh for help (just like the Samson story in Judg. 13:1), and no judge was raised as a deliverer by Yahweh. Eli was already a judge (1 Sam. 4:18), but he had done nothing about the oppression and was not serving as a military leader. He had become worse than Samson by doing nothing at all.

**4:5-6** When the Ark of the Covenant came into the camp, the Israelites gave a battle cry to invoke a war backed by Yahweh (Josh. 6:5, 20), but it did not work because they still had not gone to Yahweh in repentance and to seek His will.

When the Philistines heard that the Ark of the Covenant had entered the Israelite camp, they became afraid because they viewed the Ark of the Covenant as a god. From their perspective, a god entering a war camp to lead its people had never happened. What is interesting is that after 300 years, they remembered the plagues that Yahweh had brought upon Egypt, and they were filled with fear. At the same time, they assumed the gods of Israel had brought the plagues.

The point the narrator is making is that there was no difference in the way Israel and the Philistines were viewing the Ark of the Covenant: as a god who would give them victory because they merely had it with them. The chosen people of Yahweh did not know Yahweh, and, therefore, they had failed to make Him known as a unique God to the nations who surrounded them.

**4:10-11** Israel went into battle confident that they would win because they had the Ark of the Covenant. Israel lost again because the Ark of the Covenant was not Yahweh Himself, and having it was not a guarantee that they would get what they wanted. They had forgotten that Yahweh is a covenantal God who requires a mutual, loving relationship and obedience to His covenant. That is why it was called the Ark of the Covenant of Yahweh; it was a reminder of their unique covenant relationship with Yahweh.

Because of Israel's idolatry, Yahweh allowed His Ark to be captured by the Philistines and carried out of Israelite territory. Normally, only the priests were allowed to carry the Ark of the Covenant under the penalty of death. Yet Yahweh allowed the pagans to take the Ark of the Covenant in order to demonstrate His power and uniqueness to both nations. This sets the stage for Yahweh's prophecy to Samuel that He was going to do something great to be fulfilled (1 Sam. 3:11). The verb *nagaph* ("defeat") is associated with the plagues in Exodus (Ex. 7:27; 12:23, 27), showing they are now the *pagans* who have been defeated by Yahweh. Israel experienced a reversed exodus, as something decreed in the covenant curses (Lev. 26:17; Deut. 28:25). They had experienced defeat at the hands of Yahweh, and Yahweh's metaphorical presence (the Ark of the Covenant) had left them just like what had happened in the exodus. The difference is that Israel had been left behind.

The entire time the Ark of the Covenant was with the Israelites, the narrator referred to it as the "Ark of the Covenant" or the "Ark of Yahweh" (the personal and covenantal name of God). Yet in 1 Sam. 4:11 the narrator refers to it as the Ark of God ('*elohim* is a generic term for God or gods). The point is that it was now in the hands of the Philistines, who did not know Yahweh as a

covenantal God or have a covenant with Him. It will be mostly referred to as the Ark of God for 1 Sam. 4:11-5:12.

At the same time, Hophni and Phinehas were killed, fulfilling the sign of Yahweh and validating the prophecy of judgment against the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:30-34; 3:11-12).

**4:12-18** When the people of Shiloh heard that the Ark of God had been taken, they were extremely afraid. Eli is described as sitting in his chair again, watching and doing nothing as Israel's judge. Yet at this point he was both physically and spiritually blind. The narrator points out that Eli feared something would happen to the Ark of God, but nothing is said of his concern for his sons.

The Benjaminite messenger told Eli the news of the battle. He told Eli that the Israelite army had experienced "heavy" (*kabad*) losses. This was a part of the judgment from Yahweh for Eli "honoring" (*kabad*) his sons above Yahweh (1 Sam. 2:29).

When Eli was told about the death of his sons, he showed no reaction. Yet when he was told about the capture of the Ark of God, he was so shocked that he fell backwards in his chair and was killed under the weight of his body. There is irony in the way Eli died. The chair/throne by which he had lifted himself up had now brought him down. Likewise, his heaviness (*kabad*) from "honoring" (*kabad*) his sons above Yahweh and eating the stolen meat of the people's sacrifices was now the thing that crushed his neck and killed him, in fulfilment of Yahweh's judgment against him for his corruption as a priest (1 Sam. 2:30-34). Eli had led Israel for forty years, but it says nothing about him bringing rest to the land like the earlier judges in the book of Judges. The death of Eli prepares the way for new leadership (Samuel) over Israel.

**4:19-22** At this time, Phinehas's wife went into labor, but the labor pains began to kill her. Because of the capture of the Ark of God, she believed that the "glory" (*kabad*) had gone from Israel. In light of all the bad things that had happened to Israel and her family, she named her son Ichabod, which means "where is glory," and then she died. Yet Yahweh's glory had not departed with the Ark of God but was heavy upon Israel and Eli.



#### **D. Yahweh Returns the Ark of the Covenant to Israel (5:1-7:2a)**

The Ark of the Covenant is mentioned 25 times in various ways using the language of the Philistines to demonstrate their understanding of the Ark of the Covenant. In the beginning, they treated the Ark of the Covenant as a magical trophy to honor their defeat of the Israelites. But as Yahweh demonstrated His power and superiority through the Ark of the Covenant, the Philistines acknowledged the kingship of Yahweh.

**5:1-2** After capturing the Ark of God, the Philistines took it to Ashdod, which was 20 miles northeast of Gaza and 40 miles southwest of the battle at Ebenezer. There they placed it in the temple of Dagon. The people of the ancient Near East believed that when armies fought in battle, there was a simultaneous battle among the gods. Therefore, the Philistines concluded that their grain god Dagon (Judg. 16:23; 1 Chr. 10:10) had defeated Yahweh in battle, and they placed the Ark of God in the temple of Dagon as a trophy. The practice of capturing the enemy's gods was common in warfare in the ancient Near East. It is often mentioned in documents such as the Assyrian royal inscriptions, Ninurta-kudurru-usur, literary texts from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I, and the Marduk Prophecy.<sup>30</sup>

**5:3-5** However, the next morning the statue of Dagon had fallen down before the Ark of Yahweh in a position that looked like it was bowing down to Yahweh in submission. Dagon lying with his face down would have been symbolic of his descending into the underworld.<sup>31</sup> They set the statue back up, but the next morning it had fallen down again before the Ark of Yahweh, this time its head and hands broken off. The head and hands were symbols of power in the ancient Near East, and the Canaanites and Philistines would often cut off the heads and hands of their enemies as a trophy of their superiority and dominance over their enemy. Thus, Yahweh used the language of their culture to demonstrate His superiority over their god Dagon.

1 Sam. 5:3-4 contains the only two times where the narrator calls the Ark the “Ark of Yahweh” since 1 Sam. 4:10 and all of 1 Sam. 5. When the Ark is described as being in Philistine territory or connected to the plague that Yahweh sent against the Philistines, it is called the “Ark of God.” But when Yahweh defeated Dagon, it is called the “Ark of Yahweh” to emphasize the uniqueness and superiority of Yahweh.

The pagans revered the thresholds of their temples since they separated the sacred space of the temple from the ordinary of the natural realm (Zeph. 1:9).<sup>32</sup> The irony is that although Dagon was a dead and no longer recognizable god, they still revered the temple by not stepping on the threshold.

**5:6-8** Yahweh’s “glory” (*kabad*) had entered Philistine territory (1 Sam. 4:21) and now was “heavy” (*kabad*) upon Ashdod, inflicting them with growths on their skin. The Hebrew word *ophel* can mean “tumors,” “hemorrhoids,” or “skin growths.” Most likely they had growths on their skin from a disease like the bubonic plague.

After the destruction of the statue of Dagon, the people immediately connected the plague to an attack from Yahweh. The Ark of God, which they had once seen as a trophy of their god’s defeat of Yahweh, was now inflicting death upon them, and they wanted nothing to do with it. The rulers of the major Philistine cities decided to send the Ark of God to Gath. They may have

<sup>30</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 203.

<sup>31</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 206.

decided to send the Ark of God to Gath, which was away from the sea coast, because the mice, the carriers of plague, were supposed to have come from there. This may have been the reason the Ark of God was not taken to Ashkelon and Gaza, two other coastal towns.<sup>33</sup>

**5:9-12** Yet even after they moved the Ark of God, Yahweh struck Gath with skin growth and also Ekron. After Yahweh's hand had been heavy on three Philistine cities, the people of Ekron demanded that the Ark of God be sent back to Israel.

**6:1-3** Here the narrator calls the Ark the "Ark of Yahweh," and for the first time the Philistines refer to it as the "Ark of Yahweh." After seven months of Yahweh demonstrating His power and superiority, they had now come to realize that Yahweh is unlike any of the other gods they worshiped.

This time the Philistine people did not go to the rulers but to the priests to figure out what to do with the Ark of Yahweh. The priests recognized that they needed to send it back to Yahweh along with a guilt offering for their sins so that they might be healed. Here they made a distinction between Yahweh and the Ark of the Covenant.

**6:4-6** The priests said that the offering given to Yahweh should be gold tumors and rats. In the ancient Near East, people would make a replica of whatever it was they feared or was causing their suffering as an offering to the gods to protect them or heal them from that thing. For example, Egyptians might wear an amulet of a gad fly to protect themselves from the bite of the gad fly, which was common in Egypt. This practice was not acceptable to Yahweh, but because of their ignorance, Yahweh accepted the offering, considering the attitude of the giver rather than the nature of the offering.

The Philistines also made a connection to the plagues Yahweh had sent on Egypt, that the plagues lasted so long because they had hardened their hearts, and that Egypt no longer suffered under Yahweh's judgment after they sent the Israelites out. They concluded that they should repent before Yahweh and send out the Ark of Yahweh to end the judgment of Yahweh. The Philistines seemed to have come further faster in their understanding of Yahweh than the Israelites had with a personal experience with Yahweh, the Law, and the tabernacle.

**6:7-12** The Philistines decided to put the Ark of Yahweh with the gold offerings on a new cart hitched to two yoked cows and send it back to Israelite territory. This was one final test to see if it was truly Yahweh against them or just natural events. The key here was that the cows had never been yoked together and had baby calves in Philistine territory. It takes training to get two yoked cows to cooperate, and mother cows would never leave their young or would at least return to them. If the cows were able to cooperate immediately, go the same direction into an unknown territory, and leave their calves behind, then they had violated their natural instincts, and it was therefore supernatural and an act of Yahweh. They sent the yoked cows with the Ark of Yahweh to Beth Shemesh—about 16 miles west of Jerusalem and the closest Israelite town to the Philistine city of Ekron. When they did this, the cows went straight to Beth Shemesh and did not waver in any direction.

**6:13-18** The cows with the Ark of Yahweh came into the city of Beth Shemesh and stopped in the city next to a rock. When the people of Beth Shemesh saw the Ark of the Covenant return on

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<sup>33</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 210.

its own, they rejoiced. The people immediately took the cart to build an altar and sacrifice the cows to Yahweh.

Beth Shemesh was a Levitical town (Josh. 21:16), and the narrator mentions the Levites to let the reader know they did not mishandle the Ark of Yahweh and had the right to make sacrifices to Yahweh.

The narrator mentions the Philistine cities that gave offerings to Yahweh in order to show that Yahweh had accepted their offerings and that they were no longer under His judgment. The rock in Beth Shemesh served as a memorial to the superiority and faithfulness of Yahweh as Israel's Rock. This is the "great thing" Yahweh had told Samuel He was going to do that would make everyone in Israel talk about it (1 Sam. 3:11).

**6:19-20** Yet unlike the pagan Philistines, the Israelites did not respect the Ark of the Covenant, and they decided to look in it, which was forbidden even for the Levites (Num. 4:20). As a result, Yahweh struck them down. Israel could not use the Ark of the Covenant for their own purposes or force the hand of Yahweh to their will. Yet the absence of the Ark of the Covenant had not taught Israel this lesson. The point is that Israel could be struck in the same way as the Philistines.

The Israelites asked the question, "Who can stand in the presence of Yahweh, this holy God?" The answer is that no one is righteous or holy enough to stand in His presence. Yet those who recognize the danger of Yahweh's authority and holiness, submit to Him in humility, and place their faith in Him that He is good can stand in His presence.

**6:21-7:2a** The men of Kiriath Jearim took the Ark of the Covenant to reside with them. Kiriath Jearim was about 8 miles west of Jerusalem and was the only Gibeonite city to have an Israelite population. It stayed in the house of Abinidab under the care of Eleazar for twenty years. Because the house of Abinidab revered Yahweh and the holiness of the Ark of the Covenant, there was no judgment on those who lived in Kiriath Jearim. The fact that they did not take the Ark of the Covenant to Shiloh shows that no valid priesthood was there; the house of Eli was no longer worthy.

## E. Samuel's Ministry as Israel's Judge (7:2b-17)

The previous six chapters have brought Israel to a crossroads. Yahweh has shown that He is capable of overcoming the Philistines but had not adopted a specific human figure (judge, prophet, or king) to do this. The office of judge is vacant. This chapter brings these elements together, indicating that Samuel is both the prophet and judge through whom Yahweh's reign would be demonstrated.<sup>34</sup>

In this section, Samuel becomes the focus again as Israel's priest, judge, and prophet. Here he functions mostly as judge as he takes advantage of the blow that Yahweh had just dealt the Philistines and leads the Israelites in a victorious battle against the Philistines at Mizpah. As a result, Samuel serves as a godly and successful judge over all of Israel in a way that the last several judges had failed to do. With the fall of the house of Eli and the godly leadership of Samuel, Israel was now ready to begin to transition into monarchy.

**7:2b-4** Yahweh's defeat of the Philistines through the Ark of the Covenant had brought the people of Israel to an awareness that they needed to return to Yahweh. The great thing Yahweh said He would do (1 Sam. 3:11) had accomplished what He said it would. Without hesitation, Samuel seized this opportunity and called the Israelites to return to Yahweh. But in order to do that, they first had to destroy their idols—specifically those of Ba'al and Ashtoreth. Ba'al was the god of the storm and was the head god in the Canaanite pantheon. Ashtoreth was a female fertility goddess, often represented by a tree carved into a fertility pole (Judg. 6:25-27). Both the Philistines and the Israelites had adopted the worship of these gods.

Samuel told them that if they turned back to Yahweh, He would deliver them from the Philistines and bless them just as He had promised (Deut. 28:1-14). Samuel's call echoes Judg. 10:6-16 terminology that associates Samuel with the judges. Samuel spoke as a prophet and acted like a judge. He did what Samson failed to do.

**7:5-6** Unlike those before him, Samuel did not permit military action outside Yahweh's will, which is why he also took on a priestly role and interceded on behalf of the nation. So far in the books of Samuel, only Hannah has prayed (1 Sam. 1:10, 12; 2:1), but now Samuel was praying on behalf of Israel. The people followed his lead and fasted and repented. The rejection of the Canaanite worship may have been an attempt to indicate that life belongs to Yahweh. The pouring out of the water and fasting are connected and were acts of self-denial.<sup>35</sup>

**7:7-9** When the Philistines heard that Israel had assembled at Mizpah, they assembled there as well, probably thinking they would gain an easy victory like they had at Ebenezer (1 Sam. 4:1-11). The people became afraid and sought out Samuel to cry out to Yahweh on their behalf, much like the people had done with Moses (Ex. 20:18-21). As Israel's priest, Samuel made a sacrifice to Yahweh and cried out to Him, and Yahweh responded. It had been almost three hundred years since Israel had had a godly leader like this.

**7:10-11** When the Philistines attacked, Yahweh thundered against them, which caused them to go into such a great panic that they scattered and began to run away. Yahweh's thundering is a polemic against Ba'al the storm god and recalls the language of Hannah's song (1 Sam. 1:6; 2:10). Israel responded by attacking and killing the Philistines, winning the battle.

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<sup>34</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> See R. P. Gordon. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 107.

What Israel's battle cry in 1 Sam. 4:6 could not achieve, Yahweh's thunder now achieved. And it was not achieved by Samuel as judge nor by a king. The role of judge has been marginalized in the battle, for political structures are less important than theological structures. In this one battle, Yahweh overturned the book of Judges. Yahweh is the king and does not need a human ruler. However, He chooses to use humans when they submit to His sovereignty.

**7:12-14** Samuel acknowledged this theological truth by building a monument to the victory Yahweh had given them. He named it Ebenezer, which means "stone of help," referring to Yahweh as Israel's Rock.

The Philistines were subdued and stopped invading Israel because Yahweh's hand was against them. Not only that, but Yahweh returned the Israelite cities that the Philistines had taken from them just as Samuel had promised He would do (Deut. 28:1-14; 1 Sam. 7:3). And Yahweh brought Israel rest (peace), a phrase that had not been mentioned since the time of Gideon.

By the time Saul comes on the scene, the Philistines had been subdued and Israel's borders had been restored because Yahweh had acted. This passage prepares for the tension that will follow. It was not a king Israel needed but rather Yahweh. Yahweh was Israel's king, yet He was also the One moving them toward kingship. What they needed to do was remain faithful to Him and recognize that He had been their help, their Ebenezer. The picture of the idealized stability of the region is intended to demonstrate the sufficiency of the theocratic order, which was about to be called into question by the people.<sup>36</sup>

**7:15-17** Unlike all the previous judges, who were localized in their leadership, Samuel continued as Israel's judge throughout the entire land. Yet he served mostly in his home town of Ramah. This division ends with the point that Samuel was a godly leader who submitted to the kingship of Yahweh, demonstrated in his building an altar to Yahweh in his home town.

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<sup>36</sup> See R. P. Gordon. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 108.

## II. Samuel and the Reign of Saul (8:1-15:35)

This division introduces the establishment of the monarchy and the reign of Saul. The people rejected the kingship of Yahweh when they requested a king who was like the kings of the pagan nations (1 Sam. 8:19-20). Yahweh responded by giving them exactly what they wanted: Saul. Saul would end up failing as a king, not because he failed to lead the people politically or militarily but because he failed to submit to the kingship of Yahweh and lead Israel in their covenant relationship with Yahweh. Because Saul chose autonomy, Yahweh rejected him as king and chose a king who would be a true Deuteronomic king (Deut. 17:14-20).

1 Sam. 8-15 are episodic narratives, where each episode is complete in itself and depends upon the completion of the previous episode. These chapters tell of isolated events from the life and reign of Saul.

### A. Kingship Is Given to Saul (8:1-12:25)

Here the people of Yahweh rejected their covenant relationship with Yahweh as they requested to be like all the other nations (1 Sam. 8:19-20), no longer unique in their covenant relationship with Yahweh. This section seems to be both pro- and anti-kingship. Here Samuel was very critical of the monarchy, a theme that reoccurs in his speeches (1 Sam. 10:17-27; 12), whereas 1 Sam. 9:1-10:16 seems favorable toward monarchy, and, as already discussed, it has been Yahweh who has been moving Israel towards kingship.

It is the narrator's voice the reader is to heed, who uses this paradox to explore the question of what type of monarchy was acceptable for Israel. Samuel is against kingship, and the request threatens his leadership, yet the people want a king—but one like all the other nations. In resolving this dilemma, Yahweh supported neither Samuel nor the people, even as He granted them their request. Yahweh would give Israel a new form of government that would continue to reflect His will, not Samuel's or the people's will. 1 Sam. 8 is the prologue to a different kind of kingship than what the people envisioned, so it does not resolve all the issues within it.<sup>37</sup>

**8:1-3** When Samuel got older, he appointed his sons as judges in Beersheba, which was the southernmost town in Israel. They are the first males to be described by the noun “judge” (see Judg. 4:4); all the previous judges were described through the verb “judge.”<sup>38</sup> Samuel's sons fulfilled only the legal role as judges and did not act as military leaders. However, Samuel's sons were corrupt judges who perverted justice for financial gain (Ex. 23:6-7; Deut. 16:18-20; Amos 2:6-8). The reader is told that Eli did not discipline his sons, but there is no comment on Samuel's actions as a father, unless his sons' corruption was the reason he appointed them to a remote area (1 Sam. 8:2).

The problem here is that the text says nothing about Yahweh raising up these judges to lead Israel, as in the case with the previous judges in the book of Judges. Samuel seems to be appointing his sons to succeed him, which means he is establishing his line as a ruling dynasty. Yet Yahweh never wanted this and was clearly moving away from judges to monarchy. Therefore, Samuel had no right to establish his sons as judges, let alone establish his family as a dynastic ruling line, which was not characteristic of judges. This event is what triggered the elders of Israel to request a king.

<sup>37</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 112.

<sup>38</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 112.

**8:4-5** Only landowners could be elders, so the desire for a king came from those who were already economically and politically influential. They used the excuse of Samuel's old age and his sons' corruption for a kingship to be established. Yet Samuel was not too old, seen in the fact that Yahweh still used him as Israel's leader for many years after this. Likewise, if Samuel could *appoint* his sons as judges, then he could *appoint* a king as well. They had asked for a king that might "judge" them, which was the role Samuel had appointed to his sons. By phrasing their request in this way (the language of royal rule introduced by Yahweh), they made it seem like they were seeking an institutionalization of the judge.<sup>39</sup>

However, the problem was not in the fact that they wanted a king, for Yahweh was already moving them toward kingship. The problem was, first, that they had decided that the leader Yahweh had appointed for them, Samuel, was too old to be useful anymore. But more significant is that they wanted a king *like all the other nations* (Deut. 17:14; Ezek. 25:8). Yahweh had chosen Israel from all the other nations in order to not be like all the other nations, to be a unique people group with a unique mission belonging to Him (Ex. 19:3-6). They were to be a blessing to the nations and call people out of those nations into Israel (Gen. 12:1-3). Now they were rejecting the very thing Yahweh wanted them to be. They most likely feared the Philistines attacking them again in Samuel's old age or the new threat of the Ammonites (1 Sam. 12:12; 11:1-11). They still had not learned that Yahweh was their true king and defender.

**8:6-9** Samuel was displeased because he knew they were rejecting him as their leader. Samuel's first response was to go to Yahweh in prayer, which shows that he understood the kingship of Yahweh better than the elders of Israel did. Yahweh responded with the point that they were really rejecting Him as king (Ps. 49; 93; 96-99), which was what they had been doing since the very moment He delivered them from Egypt, adopted them as His own, and made them unique among the nations.

Yahweh commanded Samuel to warn the people that the type of king they wanted would rule the nation for his own autonomy and power, not for the benefit of them and their families. Samuel was to testify that the king's role was to promote justice, according to Deut. 17:14-20. The people requested a model of kingship that oppressed the people, thus perverting justice and seeking to negate Yahweh's authority.

**8:10-18** Samuel went to the people and reminded them what a king like all the other nations was like. In describing a worldly king's "justice," the dominant word is "take" (1 Sam. 8:11, 13, 14, 16). The king would take their sons, daughters, lands, and resources to build his own kingdom and to fight wars to benefit himself, not the people.

Samuel concluded with the point that when the people cry out to Yahweh for relief from this king they had chosen, Yahweh would not answer them. The king would not be Yahweh's true representative if they wanted something that was the same as all the other nations. They could not expect His blessings and help when the king's service was idolatrous.<sup>40</sup> The elders were requesting a new kind of idolatry.

**8:19-20** "The people" is used rather than "the elders," suggesting that the elders' request had grassroots support. Although Samuel had listened to them, they would not listen to him and demanded that he give them what they wanted. Here they made it clear that they wanted a

<sup>39</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 113.

<sup>40</sup> See M. Garsiel. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 66.

military leader to protect their borders and win their wars. They did not believe Yahweh was capable even though He had demonstrated His power over their enemies time after time.

Yahweh commanded him to appoint the king they wanted. Yahweh was going to give them exactly what they wanted—as judgment for their desire for autonomy. In the face of unrelenting human disobedience, Yahweh permits what He explicitly condemns, leaving humans to the consequences of their actions. Yahweh’s decision to give them a king and His command to Samuel to give it to them is crucial because it shows that Yahweh took the initiative in appointing the king.<sup>41</sup>

**9:1-2** The narrator now introduces Saul of the tribe of Benjamin. The name “Saul” comes from the verb “to ask” (*sha'al*) Yahweh gave them what they “asked” for. There are immediate worrying hints in Saul’s introduction. Saul’s father Kish is a “man of valor” (Judg. 20:44-46) from the tribe of Benjamin, which reminds the reader of the Benjaminites in Judg. 19-21. Kish was a descendant from the Benjaminites, who had abducted women and forced them into marriage.

Notice that Saul is not described by his character of godliness but rather that he was good looking and a head taller than anyone else, making him a great warrior. These are the things the world seeks in picking leaders but are not what Yahweh looks for (1 Sam. 16:7).

**9:3-4** Kish’s donkeys went missing, and he sent his son Saul and his servant to find them. Donkeys often went astray, and their owners went far to find them and bring them back. The word “servant” comes from the Hebrew word *na'ar*, the same word used of Samuel when he was called a “lad.” As they search for the donkeys, it becomes clear that the servant (*na'ar*) is the story’s central figure because he was more resourceful than Saul, just as Samuel as a “lad” (*na'ar*) was more capable than Eli’s sons. Servants at this time were more than just workers; they were managers of estates.<sup>42</sup> They searched in many towns and did not find the donkeys. It is at this point that one suspects this to be the providence of Yahweh.

**9:5-10** Saul wanted to give up and go back home, but the servant thought of seeking the help of the prophet of Yahweh. The servant, not Saul, saw Samuel as someone who always spoke the truth and whose prophecies came true (1 Sam. 3:19). Saul was worried about what gift they would bring the prophet since they had no money, yet it was the servant who had a quarter of a shekel.

**9:11-13** As they came to the city where Samuel lived, they encountered women getting water. The account fits the biblical-type scene that usually leads to a betrothal (Gen. 24:15-50; 29:9-20; Ex. 2:16-22).<sup>43</sup> But the narrator introduces this element only to subvert it, because this is not what happened.

They were told they had to wait for Samuel to come back because the people of the city had to wait for their prophet to bless the sacrifice before they could eat. This is a preparatory allusion to what Saul would fail to do in 1 Sam. 13.<sup>44</sup> High places were hills where altars to gods were built and were usually condemned. However, here there is no negative connotation.

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<sup>41</sup> See J. P. Fokkelman. *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, p. 354.

<sup>42</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 265.

<sup>43</sup> See R. Alter. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 181.

<sup>44</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 123.

**9:14-17** At this point the narrator reveals that indeed the runaway donkeys were the providence of Yahweh to bring Saul to Samuel. Yahweh had revealed to Samuel the day before that Saul was the man whom Yahweh had chosen to anoint as ruler over Israel. Here it is clear that although the people had requested a king, it was Yahweh who would choose the king.

Yahweh told Samuel that He had heard the cry of His people and that Saul was the man He had chosen to deliver them from the hand of the Philistines. This was the same purpose Yahweh had given Samson, who failed to do so (Judg. 3:5).

**9:18-21** When Samuel and Saul met, Samuel told Saul that his donkeys had already been found but that he was to stay the night with Samuel and that Samuel would tell him everything he was thinking. Samuel then told him that all the desire of Israel had turned to Saul. This phrase is enigmatic, suggesting that either Saul and his family were the goal of Israel's desire, or all that was desirable in Israel belonged ultimately to Saul and his family. The latter is more probable.<sup>45</sup>

Saul would have had to be confused and dumbfounded, for he came seeking donkeys and was now being told that he was going to be the king that Israel had requested. Saul stated that there was no way it could be him, for he was the least in the least tribe, which might have been true to a certain extent, but self-deprecation was common in the ancient Near East.

**9:22-27** Samuel then set Saul at the head of thirty men, probably elders in the city, and they had a meal from the sacrifice. This would have been a fellowship sacrifice and a covenantal meal binding them together. Samuel and Saul spent the night talking, and in the morning Samuel sent the servant away so that he could anoint Saul.

**10:1a** Samuel anointed Saul by pouring oil on his head, a common way of appointing people to special roles of leadership, like priests, kings, and prophets. Samuel then told Saul that Yahweh had chosen him to be leader over Yahweh's people and that his purpose was to deliver them from the hands of the enemies that surrounded them. Notice that Samuel specifically called the Israelites Yahweh's people, not Saul's people. The private anointing initiated by Yahweh was not complete until the later, public declaration of the choice in 1 Sam. 10:17-24.

When Samuel named Saul leader, he never used the word *melek*, which means "king." Samuel anointed Saul as a *nāgîd*, a term with an imprecise meaning but with enough breadth to cover tribal (2 Chr. 19:11), royal, military (1 Chr. 13:1), and priestly leadership (2 Chr. 31:12). The term seems to be intentionally ambiguous.<sup>46</sup> Saul was not another judge, but neither would he act with the same authority as the kings of the other nations. His leadership role would be determined by Yahweh as communicated through the prophet Samuel. Saul's role was not one with absolute freedom (Deut. 17:14-20; Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), but rather he would be a regent of Yahweh.

**10:1b-6** Samuel then gave Saul instructions on what he was to do on his first day as regent. Samuel told Saul of two signs that he would experience to validate that Yahweh had chosen him as regent through His prophet. The first sign would come in two stages. First, he would find three men at Rachel's tomb who would tell him that his father's donkeys had been found. Second, he would come to the tree of Tabor and meet three men carrying three young goats, three loaves of bread, and a container of wine, and they would give him two loaves of bread.

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<sup>45</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 124.

<sup>46</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 120.

The second sign would come when he reached Gibeah, which was about three miles north of Jerusalem and where there was a Philistine military outpost. There, he would meet a company of prophets, the Spirit of Yahweh would come upon him, and he would begin to prophesy and be changed into a different person. To be “changed into different person” was not to actually become another person but rather to be equipped with the power to play a new role for Yahweh when the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him. Saul’s prophesying has to do with his election, not with his becoming a prophet.<sup>47</sup>

**10:7-8** Once those signs were fulfilled, Saul was to accomplish two tasks. The first was that he was to do whatever his hands found to do while he was in Gibeah, for Yahweh was with him. The point was that he was supposed to attack the Philistine outpost.<sup>48</sup> One of the roles of the Spirit of Yahweh is to empower a person to do the will of Yahweh (Judg. 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:4). Yahweh had already stated that His will for Saul as regent was to defeat the enemies of Israel (1 Sam. 9:16; [NET] 10:1) and he just happened to be at a Philistine military outpost. Samson is the only other figure of whom it is said that the Spirit of Yahweh “rushed” (Judg. 14:16, 19; 15:14) upon him. It may have to do with their association with the Philistines. This would highlight the fact that Saul was supposed to attack the Philistines. Saul was authorized by the command of the prophet and his encounter with the Spirit of Yahweh to attack the Philistines. This task was an important test, for it was a means of proving his openness to Yahweh’s leading and willingness to do His work under the prophet and the power of the Spirit of Yahweh.

The second task was that Saul was to go to Gilgal after he defeated the Philistines and wait seven days for Samuel to show up so that Samuel could offer up a burnt and fellowship sacrifice on Saul’s behalf. This would be an offering to Yahweh for the victory He had given Saul in Gibeah.

**10:9-13** After Saul left, the narrator states that Yahweh changed Saul’s heart and the signs were fulfilled. The narrator skips over the details of the signs and goes straight to the coming of the Spirit of Yahweh. Since the change of Saul’s heart and the coming of the Spirit of Yahweh were primary, the narrator brings it to the foreground in the fulfillment narrative.

Saul’s prophesying with the other prophets caught the attention of the people of Gibeah, who began to ask if Saul had become one of them. One of the men asked who their father was. The word for *father* can refer to a teacher (2 Kgs. 2:12; 6:21; 13:14). This means that man was not asking who Saul’s father was but from what prophetic teacher did he learn to prophecy. The answer is the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him.

**10:14-16** After this, Saul returned home and told his uncle that he was looking for the donkeys but, when he could not find them, had gone to Samuel. He did not tell his uncle anything of what Samuel said about kingship, the signs, or his commanded tasks.

When the Spirit of Yahweh came upon Saul in Gibeah, he did not attack the Philistine military outpost or go to Gilgal to wait for Samuel; instead, he went straight home. Saul failed to obey the word of Yahweh as spoken through His prophet and wasted the Spirit of Yahweh, just like Gideon and Jephthah (Judg. 7:33-35; 11:29-31). Saul failed the test of submitting to the kingship and command of Yahweh on his very first day as regent. And because he knew it and was scared to be regent, he did not tell his uncle anything about it.

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<sup>47</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 288.

<sup>48</sup> See V. P. Long. *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul*, p. 207. And see David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 126.

**10:17-19** It is not clear here how much time had passed since Saul's failure in Gibeah. Saul had done nothing to claim the throne after the confirming signs, even to the extent of keeping the news from his uncle. So, Samuel took the lead to move the process from private anointing to public confirmation. Samuel summoned the people to Yahweh at Mizpah. Mizpah was where Israel had gathered prior to the destruction of the tribe of Benjamin after the events of Gibeah (Judg. 20:1), and now they were going to anoint a Benjaminite king.

Samuel reminded the people that Yahweh had delivered them from the surrounding nations who had kings and who had oppressed them, but now they had rejected Yahweh as their king by wanting a king like those oppressive nations.

**10:20-22** Samuel selected the king by lot by bringing the people up by tribe, clan, and then family. This association with Achan being taken by lot, as well as later with Jonathan's taking by lot (1 Sam. 14:36-42), casts a negative literary shadow over Saul's selection.

"If we are to judge by texts like Num. 26:55, Josh. 18:6 or Prov. 16:33, the process of making selections through the casting of lots may be seen as something positive, or at least neutral. But the only times the taking of a person is described apart from this narrative are for someone who is in some way guilty. We must therefore distinguish between Samuel's actions in following this process and the literary interpretation offered by the text. No one present would have regarded it as sinister. But the narrator, by evoking the taking of Achan and preparing for that of Jonathan (which influences subsequent readings), raises questions for us."<sup>49</sup>

When the lot fell on Saul, he was nowhere to be found, so they inquired of Yahweh as to where he was. Yahweh said he was hiding among the baggage. Though Saul was a head taller than anyone else, he was filled with fear and did not present himself as a confident leader or military leader. Previously, Saul had sought the lost donkeys, which he could not find; now the people sought Saul, whom they could not find.

**10:23-24** When the people found Saul, the first thing they noticed was his great height (1 Sam. 9:2), and they assumed that he was a great warrior, not knowing he had already failed to do battle with the enemy. There might be an allusion to the Anakites, whom the Israelites had feared as giants (Num. 13:31-33; Deut. 1:28; 2:10, 21; Josh. 11:21-22), but now they had their own "giant" to do battle for them. What they so foolishly failed to consider was that he was hiding in fear from being king. There is irony in someone being taller than everyone else but unable to be found in the crowd.

**10:25** Samuel explained the duties of the king to the people (Deut. 17:14-20) and then wrote them on a scroll, depositing it before Yahweh as a testimony against them for when the king failed to adhere to his duties. Samuel used the same term *mišpāt* ("regulations") as when he addressed the elders in 1 Sam. 8:10. It seems that the message he inscribed was negative toward kingship.

According to Deut. 17:14-20 there were five regulations for the king. First, the king had to be an Israelite of the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, especially if his job was to represent Yahweh.

Second, the king must not accumulate horses. Horses were a symbol of military might. Egypt was a major horse market in the ancient Near East. Therefore, the king must not build a strong

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<sup>49</sup> David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 132.

military, for he must depend on Yahweh for his military victory (Ex. 17:8-16). Likewise, he would be less likely to be corrupted by power and dominate others if he did not have a massive military.

Third, the king was not to have multiple wives. In the ancient Near East, kings' wives often represented treaties between nations. Each king would marry the daughter of the other king and have children with her. This not only joined the two kings together as family but also ensured that the other would not attack as long as his daughter and grandchildren were living with that king. Yahweh wanted the king to trust Him, not political treaties, for the protection of the kingdom.

Likewise, these foreign wives would bring their pagan gods into the family and tempt the king to devote himself to these gods (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). More wives meant more pagan gods. These would then influence the king and the children of the king, who would inherit the throne after the king's death (Deut. 6:4-9).

Fourth, the king was not to amass a large personal fortune. Once again, Yahweh did not want the king to place his trust in earthly wealth, rather than in Yahweh, for his security and success.

Fifth, the king was to make his own copy of the Torah and then read it throughout his lifetime. This copying of the Torah would cause him to really focus and think on the covenant of Yahweh. If the king was to represent Yahweh and His covenant, then he would have to know it better than anyone.

The point of these regulations was to limit the power of the king so as to avoid tyranny and the possibility of his assuming the Yahweh's rule over the people. Second, these regulations place upon the king the obligations to be the model Israelite of righteousness and justice.<sup>50</sup>

**10:26-27** When Saul went home, he was accompanied by valiant men whose hearts Yahweh changed into going with Saul. Yahweh had touched their hearts, so that from the beginning Yahweh was working with Saul. This was possibly the beginning of a standing army in Israel. However, it is unclear since the term can be used of wealth or military prowess. Both may be implied.<sup>51</sup>

But there is a stark contrast with another group of the so-called "sons of Belial." They were opposing the person whom Yahweh had anointed; therefore, they were opposing Yahweh. There is an irony in that these people did not recognize that Yahweh had indeed chosen Saul, and thus they stood in opposition to His purposes. Yet their question raised the issue where Saul would be shown to later fail in defeating Yahweh's enemies.<sup>52</sup> The answer to their question, "Can this man save us?" was *no*, for Saul was not their savior. Saul remained silent to their opposition. It is not clear if this was a position of strength or weakness.

**11:1-3** Jabesh Gilead was 22 miles southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Nahash the Ammonite was claiming the territory east of the Jordan River. The Ammonites tried to claim this territory during the time of Jephthah (Judg. 10:17-18). This may have been the threat that prompted Israel to request a king like all the other nations. Knowing they would die otherwise, the men of Jabesh Gilead asked to make a treaty with Nahash, where they would be his slaves if he let them live.

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<sup>50</sup> See Patrick D. Miller. *Deuteronomy*, pp. 148-49.

<sup>51</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 133.

<sup>52</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 133-134.

Nahash agreed to make a treaty under one condition—that they all gouge out their right eyes, humiliating them and making it difficult for them to rebel against him one day. They asked for seven days in which to find a champion to fight Nahash before they made the treaty. In his overconfidence, Nahash agreed to their request.

**11:4-8** The distance between Jabesh Gilead and Gibeah is about 42 miles, and making the trip would take about two days.<sup>53</sup> The men of Jabesh Gilead were specifically looking for Saul, their new king, to come and rescue them. When Saul heard the news, the Spirit of Yahweh came upon him to empower him to defeat the Ammonites. In anger, Saul cut up his oxen and sent the pieces throughout Israel, demanding that men gather to him in battle or the same thing would be done to their oxen. The terror of Yahweh fell upon people, and they gathered to Saul to help him defeat the Ammonites. The term “thousands” should be understood as the largest military unit rather than an actual thousand people (1 Sam. 4:2; 10:19). The mention of Samuel suggests that Saul did not see himself acting independently as a king. But Saul did not refer to Yahweh even though his actions were inspired by the Spirit of Yahweh.

**11:9-11** Saul told the messengers that by noon the next day the Ammonites would be defeated, and they then told the people of Jabesh Gilead. The next day, Saul divided his men into three divisions and fought the Ammonites until they were defeated. This event shows that Saul did have what it took to be king and deliver his people.

The question is why Saul responded to the Spirit of Yahweh here and obediently defeated the Ammonites when he did not do so in Gibeah with the Philistine military outpost. It could be that he was connected in some way to the people of Jabesh Gilead. When the Benjaminite tribe was going extinct in the book of Judges, the other tribes decided to go to Jabesh Gilead to kill all the males, abduct 400 women, and give them to the Benjaminites as their wives (Judg. 21:10-14).

Yet the test Yahweh had for Saul was not against Nahash but against the Philistines (1 Sam. 10:5-10). The true enemies were the Philistines, who lived within the nation of Israel and were supposed to be eliminated during the conquest in the book of Judges. The Ammonites were an external enemy whom Israel was not allowed to attack unless they were attacked first. The Ammonites probably would have not been a threat if Israel had dealt with their internal enemy. What true good was Saul’s victory over the external enemy (the Ammonites) if their enemy the Philistines still lived among them?

**11:12-13** Saul’s victory against Nahash shows that there were no real grounds to oppose him as king. So, the people wanted to put to death the men who had opposed Saul’s anointing (1 Sam. 10:27). They may have believed that opposing Saul was blasphemy against Yahweh, which was punishable by death, because they were opposing Yahweh’s anointed king. But Saul declared that they would not be executed. This is the first instance in which Saul acted on his own without the guidance of Samuel. The question is, did Saul have the right to stay their execution? Did he do it because it might make him more popular, or was he a wise and just king? The narrator answers neither of these questions, but they lay the foundation for Samuel’s speech in 1 Sam. 12.

**11:14-15** Thus, Samuel decided to take Saul and the people to Gilgal to renew Saul’s kingship. Now that Saul had finally acted like a king, it was time to establish him fully as king before the

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<sup>53</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 307.

people. This was not a renewal of the kingship or a confirmation of Saul as king, but rather it was a renewal of the Israelites' allegiance to Saul as king.<sup>54</sup>

**12:1-5** Now that Israel had its king, Samuel gave his farewell speech to the people as their direct leader. However, he would still be the prophetic leader over the nation as he directly led Saul as king. Yet here in his speech he largely ignored Saul.

Samuel told the people that he had given them exactly what they wanted, a strong king, which was good for them, adding sarcastically that he was old, as they stated in 1 Sam. 8:4-5. Samuel then contrasted the king's "walking before you" and his "having walked before you." "Walk before" means to perform a function on someone's behalf; here, the someone was Yahweh.<sup>55</sup>

Samuel demanded that the people testify whether he had taken anything from the people. Their answer was a resounding *no*, meaning he was not guilty of any injustice against them. The dominant word in his series of questions is the word "take," just as it was when he told the people what the king would do to them (1 Sam. 8:10-20). Samuel was contrasting his not taking anything from them with the fact that Saul their king would take a lot from them. He reminded them that a godly leader is characterized by justice and not by looks, power, or victories against enemies.

**12:6-11** Samuel then quickly summarized the history of Israel, starting with the point that Yahweh had chosen them, delivered them, and made them into a great nation. Yet they had constantly walked away from Yahweh in idolatry. And every time their rebellion had ruined their lives, they would cry out to Yahweh to rescue them, and He always came and delivered them from their enemies. Yahweh has always been faithful to them even though they had not been faithful to Him.

**12:12** But when they saw the threat of Nahash, they did not go to the absolutely sovereign Yahweh, who had always delivered them; instead, they wanted a flawed human king like all the other nations to rescue them. So now they have the king they wanted to save them. The irony was that Saul's test was meant to be with the Philistines, not the Ammonites (1 Sam. 10:5-8).

Even so, Samuel stated that all could go well with them if both the king and they submitted to the kingship of Yahweh ("fear of Yahweh") and obeyed His commands. But if they did not, then Yahweh's hand would be against them (Deut. 28). "To fear," "to serve," and "to obey" characterize the basic conditions of a good relationship between Yahweh and His people.<sup>56</sup>

This promise of blessing to Saul and the people if they obeyed Yahweh shows that Yahweh had not doomed Saul to fail but that he would have a choice to obey Yahweh or not obey Him, just like everyone else.

**12:13-19** Samuel then called on Yahweh to appear in the storm and thunder before the people in order to remind them of the great power of Yahweh and that they had chosen a human over the power of Yahweh that they would see on this day. The people were filled with such fear that they asked Samuel to pray to Yahweh that they would not die.

**12:20-25** Samuel then encouraged them to not be afraid even though they had sinned against Yahweh because they could still do what is right by serving Yahweh with all their hearts. He told

<sup>54</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 312.

<sup>55</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 317.

<sup>56</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, p. 324.

them not to turn to idols, in this case kings, because idols could not really help or save them. Then Samuel ended his speech in the same way he began, that Yahweh would never forsake them. They should remember all the great things He had done for them and serve Him only (Deut. 10:12), and, in one final reminder, if they persisted in evil, then both they and their king would die.

## B. Kingship Is Removed from Saul (13:1-15:35)

From the very beginning, Saul failed to align himself with the will of Yahweh and accept his true purpose and role in Yahweh's kingdom. This section highlights the different flaws of Saul, the most prominent being his failure to obey Yahweh. Even when Saul's actions were inspired by the Spirit of Yahweh, he still did not seek Yahweh's will for leading the nation. Because of Saul's insistence in ignoring the will of Yahweh, Yahweh would reject Saul's kingship.

The narrator also focuses on Saul's inability to fulfill his purpose—delivering Israel from the hands of the enemy. The people requested someone to lead them in battle (1 Sam. 8:19-20), and Yahweh declared this to be the purpose of Saul's reign (1 Sam. 9:16). Yet Saul would fail to be effective in any way in battle and to carry out Yahweh's instructions concerning the enemy.

**13:1** It is unknown how old Saul was when he began to reign and how long he reigned. The Hebrew Masoretic Text (one of the oldest and most reliable Hebrew texts) does not have the word "thirty." A number appears to have dropped out of the Hebrew text, since the Hebrew reads, "a son of a year," yet Saul was more than one year old when he began to reign. The KJV, attempting to resolve this issue, reads, "Saul reigned one year," but that is not the normal meaning of the Hebrew text. Some Greek manuscripts have "thirty years" here (NIV, NET, NCV, NLT). Some scholars prefer to say that Saul was "forty years" old, considering that Jonathan was old enough to be a military leader in 1 Sam. 13:2 (NASB, ASV). Other English versions simply supply ellipsis marks for the missing number (NSRV, NAB).

For the length of Saul's reign, the Hebrew Masoretic Text has "two years." If this number is correct, then the meaning would be that after Saul had reigned for two years, he began to consolidate an army for the events that follow in the chapter (KJV, ASV, CEV). But if "two years" is intended to be a comprehensive report on the length of Saul's reign, the number is too small. According to Acts 13:21, Saul reigned for forty years. Some English versions add the forty years of Acts to the "two years" here and translate the number as "forty-two years" (NIV, NASB, NCV, NLT). Other English versions replace the "two" with the number "forty" (NET). Other English versions simply supply ellipsis marks for the missing number (NSRV, NAB).<sup>57</sup>

The fact that the narrative of 1 Sam. 9-10 suggests Saul was single and in 1 Sam. 13 Saul's son Jonathan was old enough to be a military leader, one could assume that at least twenty years have passed since Saul became king. The fact that the following chapters show no progress in defeating the Philistines that means Saul had accomplished very little so far in his reign (1 Sam. 13:19-23).

**13:2-4** Saul had divided his men between himself and his son Jonathan. Yet, at this point, Jonathan is not introduced as Saul's son. This will not be mentioned until 1 Sam. 13:16, after Saul's first rejection.

The narrator's first introduction to Jonathan is that he attacked the Philistine outpost at Geba. Geba and Gibeah were so close together they are often talked about as the same city. In fact, the two cities shared the same Philistine outpost. This means Jonathan attacked the Philistine outpost at Gibeah that his father was supposed to attack by the command of Samuel (1 Sam. 10:5-8).

When Saul heard what Jonathan had done, he sounded the trumpet and announced to all the Israelite men that he had attacked the Philistine outpost. In some ways as king this was Saul's

<sup>57</sup> See David Toshio Tsumura. *The First Book of Samuel*, pp. 331-333.

victory, but it is obvious here that he was taking credit for what his son Jonathan had done. Yet Saul moved his men to Gilgal, which was away from the battle.

**13:5-7a** Having returned to Gilgal, the Philistines could take the territory Saul had previously occupied at Michmash. The Philistines responded to Jonathan's attack and moved their military deeper into Israelite territory. They were able to do so because Saul was not there to stop them. Saul had wasted the advantage that Jonathan had given them in attacking the Philistine outpost at Geba. It is now clear that Jonathan was doing what his father was afraid to do.

When the Israelites saw the Philistine army, they followed the example of their king and ran and hid in caves. Some went so far as crossing the Jordan River on the eastern border of Israel into the Transjordan region.

**13:7b-9** In Gilgal Saul waited seven days for Samuel to arrive. Now the narrator makes it clear why Saul went to Gilgal; he was obeying the command of Samuel to wait there for him after he defeated the Philistine outpost in Gibeah (1 Sam. 10:7-8). The problem with this is that he did not do it when he was supposed to. It has now been years since the initial command, and he expected Samuel to just show up, and he was not even the one who attacked the Philistine outpost. Perhaps this was why he announced to everyone that he had attacked the Philistine outpost—so that Samuel would find out and come as he said he would. The fact that Saul went to Gilgal to wait for Samuel shows that he knew exactly what Samuel had commanded him to do the day he was anointed king (1 Sam. 10:7-8).

However, Samuel did not come, and even more of Saul's men began to run away in fear. When Saul saw this, he decided to take matters into his own hands and make the animal sacrifice to Yahweh without Samuel. This was a direct violation of Yahweh's Law, in which only the Levitical priests were allowed to make sacrifices in the tabernacle (Lev. 17:2-4; Deut. 12:5-7), though this did not include just killing animals for food (Deut. 12:15). Saul was elevating himself like a Canaanite king-priest rather than submitting to the limitation of power that Yahweh had put on the king (Deut. 17:14-20) and the separation of king and priest roles commanded in the Law.

**13:10-12** Just after Saul made the sacrifice, Samuel showed up and asked him what he had done. Saul immediately began to blame everyone else for abandoning him or being against him. Saul's reply to Samuel moves from those who had scattered (the people) to the one who had not come (Samuel) to those who had come (the Philistines). Therefore, he felt alone and that he needed to seek Yahweh's favor, so he felt compelled to offer burnt offerings. The problem with this is that one does not seek Yahweh's favor by disobeying Yahweh. There is a sense that Saul was trying to manipulate Yahweh into aiding him through his sacrifice. Yet, the capture and return of the Ark of the Covenant showed that Yahweh cannot be manipulated (1 Sam. 4:1b-7:1). The Hebrew word *'aphaq*, which means "forced to" or "compelled" shows that Saul knew his action was inappropriate, yet he did it anyway.

**13:13-14** Samuel then rebuked Saul for disobeying his command to wait for him before making sacrifices (1 Sam. 10:8). The fool is the one who is unable to choose right (2 Sam. 24:10). Yahweh was prepared to establish Saul's line as kings forever, yet because of his disobedience his house (family line) would not endure, just like Eli before him. Saul had refused to see himself as Yahweh's regent (*nāgîd*) and did not submit to Yahweh's will and conform to Yahweh's pattern for kingship.

Therefore, Yahweh had already chosen a new person to be ruler (*nāgîd*), not king (*melek*). Not that the next person would not technically be king but that he would truly see himself as Yahweh's regent (*nāgîd*), for this person would be a man after Yahweh's heart. This phrase means someone who desires, pursues, and submits to the will of Yahweh. Though Yahweh had punished Saul, 1 Sam. 14 will make it clear that the whole nation was not punished for Saul's disobedience when Yahweh works through Jonathan to bring another defeat against the Philistines.

**13:15-18** Without a word, Saul left and returned to Gibeah. Only 600 men were left with him. This has a dark tone to it, for Saul's being a Benjaminite with 600 men connects him literally to the civil war of Israel and the 600 Benjaminites who took the women from Jabesh Gilead and Shiloh and forced them into marriage (Judg. 20-21). This foreshadows the damage to the nation that Saul was about to bring.

Here Jonathan was with Saul, and only now is Jonathan called Saul's son, suggesting an element of tragedy in the judgment, given his bravery against the enemy. The tragedy of Saul's consequences will be emphasized when Jonathan demonstrates an incredible faith in Yahweh and submission to His will in 1 Sam. 14.

The combination of Saul having made no attempt to defeat the Philistines in his kingship, his men now being so few, and the Philistines having gathered at Michmash even closer and surrounding Gibeah shows that Saul's position was one in which victory appeared to be impossible.

**13:19-22** The narrator then emphasizes how desperate the situation was for Israel. The Philistines had gained so much power over Israel that they were controlling the blacksmith trade. All farmers had to go to the Philistines to sharpen their farm tools for an extremely high price. The Philistines did this so that the Israelites could not make weapons to attack them. In all of Israel, only Saul and Jonathan had swords. This emphasizes all the more that Saul had done nothing to deliver Israel from the Philistines, and the irony was that this was exactly why Israel wanted a king (1 Sam. 8:19-20) and the purpose that Yahweh had given Saul (1 Sam. 10:1, 7-8).

**13:23** The chapter ends with an additional Philistine force moving out to the fords at Michmash, only a short distance from Saul's force in Gibeah. Saul was surrounded, and defeat seemed inevitable.

**14:1-3** In contrast to Saul, Jonathan, without hesitation, and his armor bearer decided to go attack the Philistine outpost at Michmash. However, he did not tell his father, probably because he knew his father would hinder him or take the credit. The armor bearer might have been a lieutenant to a senior officer and one who not only helped carry the weapons of the officer but also helped him attack those the officer had wounded and be his rear guard.

Meanwhile, Saul was in Gibeah doing nothing with his 600 men and the priest Ahijah from the house of Eli. The presence of Ahijah, the son of Eli, is not positive when read in light of 1 Sam. 2:36 and 3:14. It seems strange that Samuel's role of guiding the king had now been taken by a member of Eli's family.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> J. P. Fokkelman. *Narrative, Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. Vol 2, p. 49.

**14:4-10** Jonathan and his armor bearer were in the valley between the hill that rose to Michmash and the hill that rose to Geba. This means they were at risk to Philistine spears and would have to climb up to the Philistines in order to attack them.

Calling the Philistines “uncircumcised” was a way of saying they were outside the covenant of Yahweh and were the enemies of Yahweh and therefore had no right to be in the Promised Land of Israel (Gen. 17:3-14; Deut. 20:16-20).

Jonathan declared his total faith in Yahweh, that Yahweh could defeat any enemy whether He was using an army or just two people, and the armor bearer professed the same faith as Jonathan. Jonathan, unlike his father, was not willing to act without permission from Yahweh. So, he decided that if the Philistines told them to come up the hill, Yahweh was granting them permission to attack, and if the Philistines said to stay in the valley, then Yahweh was not allowing them to attack. Jonathan did not see Yahweh in the same way as his father and was willing to submit to the authority of Yahweh.

**14:11-15** Yahweh responded to Jonathan through the Philistines and gave them permission to attack. Without hesitation, Jonathan and the armor bearer climbed up the hill on their hands and feet while Yahweh protected them in their vulnerability from the Philistines. Jonathan gave credit to Yahweh, and Yahweh gave Jonathan the ability to kill twenty Philistines in the outpost in half a yoke (acre; 43,560 square feet) of land. The yoke refers to the area yoked oxen could plough in a day, the basis for the measurement of an acre. Yahweh then sent a panic throughout the entire Philistine army and sent an earthquake through their camp.

**14:16-19** When Saul saw what was happening in the Philistine camp, he immediately assumed someone had left them, maybe thinking of Jonathan’s previous attack (1 Sam. 13:3). Saul then commanded Ahijah to consult Yahweh through the Ark of the Covenant. There is no evidence elsewhere of the Ark of the Covenant being used to receive a message from Yahweh. It may presume the presence of the ephod or show Saul’s ignorance. The presence of the Ark of the Covenant may show that Saul was viewing it as a form of protection, indicating he had not learned from the capture and return of the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam. 4:1b-7:1). Yet when Saul saw the increasing panic in the Philistine camp, he chose not to wait on Yahweh for an answer.

**14:20-23** When Saul went to battle, he found the Philistines striking each other because of the confusion that Yahweh sent among them. This also caused the Israelites who had joined the Philistines and those in hiding to come back to Saul’s army. And Saul actually began to attack the Philistines for the first time, because of Jonathan’s initiative. On that day, Yahweh gave Israel the victory over the Philistines. This closing statement quotes Ex. 14:30, associating this victory with the crossing of the Red Sea. Israel pushed the Philistines past Beth Aven (probably Bethel) closer to Philistine territory.

Whereas Saul reacted to situations, Jonathan created opportunities and sought Yahweh’s leading in his actions (1 Sam. 14:6, 10, 12). And, although Saul began to inquire of Yahweh (1 Sam. 14:18), he did not carry through, so the narrator’s comment in 1 Sam. 14:23 is crucial. In spite of his responsibility, Saul was not leading the nation to victory; Yahweh was through Jonathan.

**14:24** Just when one thinks Saul was finally aiding his people, the narrator states that the army was in distress because of Saul. Saul had put them under an irrational vow that they were not allowed to eat before evening or the enemy had been defeated. The oath sounds like a desire to manipulate Yahweh into giving him victory. Though food preparation was time consuming for

an army, Saul did not have to ban the eating of all foods. He could have allowed them to eat the honey of the woods (1 Sam. 14:25-26), which was the ancient equivalent of fast food, or the plunder of the Philistine outpost (1 Sam. 14:30). Saul also stated that he was going to get vengeance for himself with the defeat of the Philistines. The victory belonged to Yahweh, but Saul claimed it for himself.

**14:25-30** When Saul's men entered the forest and saw the honey, no one ate because of their fear of the oath. Meanwhile, Jonathan, who did not know of the oath because he was actually attacking the Philistines, ate of the honey in the woods, and his energy was restored. And then the men explained to Jonathan that all the men were faint because of Saul's vow. Jonathan condemned his father for troubling Israel with his irrational vow. The defeat of the enemy would have been even greater if the men had their full strength from eating the plunder of the Philistine outpost. Jonathan's reference to the possible Philistine spoil leads to the next episode, which increases Saul's culpability as he moves from folly to breach of Law.

**14:31-35** By the end of the day, the men were so famished that they butchered the livestock of the Philistines and ate it uncooked with its blood still in the meat because they could not wait for the time it would have taken to make a fire and cook the meat. According to the Law, livestock were to be slaughtered first (Deut. 12:15-25), and one was not allowed consume the blood (Lev. 3:17). Saul responded by building a battlefield altar to Yahweh on which the men could slaughter the animals. This was the first altar he had built. However, his oath had created the problem in the first place.

**14:36-39** Saul decided to continue to attack the Philistines at night. But it was Ahijah who suggested that the previously broken communication with Yahweh be resumed. Yet when they consulted Yahweh, He did not respond to Saul's inquiry. Saul gathered all his leaders together to determine who had sinned, believing that Yahweh was not answering him because someone had broken his vow. Saul did not even know why Yahweh was not answering him, whether there even was sin, what the sin was, and whether it deserved death. What is shocking is that Saul swore that whoever had sinned against his vow would be put to death even if it was his own son. Some scholars think that Saul used his oath to invoke Jonathan's death, yet the narrator is silent on this issue.

**14:40-42** Saul then separated his men from himself and Jonathan. They cast the Urim and Thummim, and Yahweh signaled Saul and Jonathan as the guilty ones. Then Yahweh signaled Jonathan as the guilty one. Did Jonathan really sin and deserve to be punished by Yahweh? There are two possibilities. The first possibility is that Jonathan was responsible for keeping the oath that Saul imposed on the army, even though he did not know about it. Thus, it is assumed Yahweh's silence was due to the violation of the oath. This would explain why Yahweh signaled Jonathan as the guilty here. In this case, even though the men would save Jonathan, Saul's curse (1 Sam. 14:24, 39) continued to be on Jonathan's head, unless "rescued" (*ma*) in 1 Sam. 14:45 implies they "redeemed" Jonathan from Yahweh.

The second possibility is that Jonathan was not under the oath (1 Sam. 14:24), that Yahweh's silence (1 Sam. 14:37) was due to the sin of the men (1 Sam. 14:33), which was the result of Saul's foolishness. In this case, the Urim and Thummim merely told how Yahweh gave Saul the

information he desired without necessarily agreeing with Saul's view that Jonathan's action was sinful and worthy of punishment.<sup>59</sup>

**14:43-46** When Saul asked Jonathan what he had done, he defended himself, saying that it was ridiculous that he had to die just because he ate a little honey. Either Jonathan was resigned to his fate or his statement was sarcastic or a question expressing his disbelief. In light of his response in 1 Sam. 14:29-30, the latter seems preferable. Unpersuaded, Saul swore in the name of God that he had to kill Jonathan. There is an allusion to Jephthah, who was also willing to sacrifice his child in order to gain victory in battle (Judg. 11:29-40). Yet it was the other soldiers who stepped in to rescue Jonathan from certain death. They recognized that Yahweh had been working through Jonathan, not Saul, to give them victory over the Philistines. Yahweh used the army to deliver Jonathan.

The Hebrew word *padah* may mean “rescued” or “redeemed.” The men may have paid the redemption price to redeem him from the consequences of the oath as discussed above (Ex. 21:30; Lev. 27:1-8). In this case, Jonathan escaped the curse, but Saul still stood under his self-imposed curse.

**14:47-48** The narrator then begins to summarize Saul's kingship as if this was the end of his story, like in the book of Judges. And in a way it is because in 1 Sam. 15, he will lose his kingship, and then in 1 Sam. 16, David is introduced as his replacement.

The narrator lists the many nations Saul had defeated successfully and from whose control he had delivered Israel. What is hard to reconcile is that in the narratives, especially 1 Sam. 17, this is not the picture presented of Saul. Apparently, somewhere in his kingship not shown by the narrator, Saul was successful in battles. But the narrator is concerned with Saul's theological failures, not his political success.

**14:49-52** The narrator then describes the members of Saul's family. The listing of Saul's sons is incomplete, omitting Abinadab (1 Sam. 31:2) and Ish-Bosheth (2 Sam. 2:8), unless Ishvi is a variant for both. The mention of the daughters Merab and Michal sets up their latter role to play in the story. What is interesting is that Saul did not develop a lavish court and extend taxation. The final statement of Saul taking every mighty warrior into his service sets the reader up for the introduction and handover to David as king.

**15:1-3** In Ex. 17:8-26, the Amalekites had attacked the defenseless Israelites as they were coming out of Egypt. As a result, Yahweh told Israel that when they entered the Promised Land, they were to eliminate the Amalekites for what they had done to the Israelites (Deut. 25:17-19). Yahweh now commanded Saul through the prophet Samuel to go and totally destroy the Amalekites.

Yahweh told Saul to “listen” (*shama'*) to His command. The Hebrew word *shama'*, which occurs seven times in 1 Sam. 15, means “listen,” “hear,” “call,” or “obey,” depending on its context. *Shama'* carries the idea of hearing and responding appropriately with action. This range of meaning is explored here to demonstrate that Saul listened to the wrong voice, and his obedience to Yahweh was therefore compromised. This is what led to his rejection, because 1 Sam. 12 made it clear that obedience to Yahweh's will is central to Israelite kingship.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See Robert. B. Chisholm. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 95.

<sup>60</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 171-172.

**15:4-6** Surprisingly Saul obeyed Yahweh and called (*shama'*) an army. The size of Saul's army is completely out of proportion to what was mentioned in 1 Sam. 14. If the latter is intended then Saul may have had members of two hundred clans from Israel and ten from Judah, perhaps an army around one or two thousand.

But before Saul attacked the Amalekites, he sent the Kenites away so that they would not be harmed. In contrast, the Kenites were the relatives of Moses and his wife and showed kindness to Israel when they came out of Egypt. Saul's sending Kenites away shows that he was honoring Moses' promise to give them land and make them part of the covenant as a reward for the assistance they had given Israel (Num. 10:29-32).

**15:7-9** Saul then attacked the Amalekites and destroyed everything except that he kept king Agag and the animals alive. He only destroyed what he despised and viewed as weak. Yahweh saw that it was good to destroy everything that belonged to the Amalekites yet Saul saw in his autonomy that it was good to spare what he saw was good. Saul had just disobeyed a direct command of Yahweh spoken through His prophet.

**15:10-12** Yahweh came to Samuel and said that He had regretted making Saul king and because he had turned away from Yahweh and disobeyed. When Samuel went to look for Saul he discovered that Saul had built a monument to himself at Carmel. Carmel was a Calebite city in the Negev, not the well-known northern site (Josh. 15:5). His shows the arrogance of Saul that he was willing to make a monument to himself when this was one of the most clearly forbidden things in the Law.

**15:13-15** When Saul saw Samuel he greeted him and declared that he had done everything that Yahweh had commanded. But Samuel pointed out that if Saul had really "listened" (*shama'*) to the word of Yahweh (1 Sam. 15:1) then why was Samuel "hearing" (*shama'*) the sound of sheep and cattle that Saul was supposed to destroy. Saul immediately blamed the soldiers for sparing the animals but justified their action with the fact that they were going to sacrifice the animals as an offering to Yahweh. Saul tried to justify his disobedience with the fact that he would worship Yahweh later with an offering to make up for not obeying Yahweh. Saul was not listening to Yahweh rather, he was listening to his own voice. For Saul it was not about obeying Yahweh completely but making sure the scales were tipped in his favor.

**15:16-19** Samuel quieted Saul's justification and told him that it was Yahweh who had made Saul great and anointed him as king but now Saul had not "obeyed" (*shama'*) Yahweh by not completely killing everything that belonged to the Amalekites as Yahweh had commanded and thus making himself great in his own eyes by doing what he thought was right but was evil in the eyes of Yahweh. The phrase doing "evil in the eyes of Yahweh" was repeated throughout the book of Judges (Judg. 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1) to describe the failure of the people of Israel.

**15:20-21** Saul continued to insist that he had "obeyed" (*shama'*) Yahweh's command completely but then admits that he had kept Agag and the animals alive and justified this action as obedience to Yahweh because he was going to sacrifice them to Yahweh. Saul was so deluded himself with his own rational for his actions that he did not see the blatant contradiction in what he was saying.

**15:22-23** Samuel then said, "does Yahweh take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as he does in obedience (*shama'*).?" Samuel made it clear that obedience is more important

to Yahweh then sacrifice, rituals, or praises. If one is not seeking Yahweh's will and to be obedient to him then everything else is just going through the motions. Sacrifice is mentioned in the first line of 1 Sam. 15:22, each of the three succeeding lines mentions obedience, always in reference to its superiority over sacrifice. Samuel's stress on obedience's priority has echoes in the Psalms and the prophets (Ps. 40:6; 51:16; Amos 5:18-24; Mic. 6:8).

Samuel then very strongly stated that rebellion against Yahweh's word and arrogance in the presence of Yahweh is the same as idolatry and divination, which is consulting with other god or spirits. Deuteronomy unconditionally condemns divination (Deut. 18:10). This will be the very thing that Saul will do at the end of his life (1 Sam. 28:6). The choice not to obey Yahweh is a sin as bad as prohibited behavior because such practices deny Yahweh's authority. As a result of Saul rejecting the word of Yahweh, Yahweh had decided to reject Saul as king.

**15:24-26** Saul then confessed his sin, but then claimed that he had been forced to "obey" (*shama'*) his men instead of Yahweh, making his following request that Samuel forgive him awkward because he had not fully accepted his guilt. The only other monarch to express himself in this way was Pharaoh (Ex. 10:16-17).<sup>61</sup> Thus the narrator shows that Saul was a king like all the other nations. Samuel denied Saul's forgiveness, since it was not genuine and restated his rejection as king.

**15:27-29** When Samuel turned to leave Saul he tore a portion of his "robe" (*me'il*) off as he clung to him and begged for him not to leave. 1 Sam. 2:19 Hannah made Samuel a "robe" (*me'il*) that symbolized his new authority as the prophet of Yahweh (1 Sam. 2:19) so now Saul was disrespecting the word of Yahweh as he tore the "robe" (*me'il*) of authority from him and tried to manipulate him into doing what he wanted. With great wit Samuel turned the tearing of the robe into an object lesson about how in the same way Yahweh had torn the kingdom from him. Samuel then told Saul that Yahweh had given the kingdom to someone better and therefore could not give him anything. And unlike humans Yahweh does not change His mind based on emotions. Yahweh's gift of the kingdom to an unnamed neighbor means that kingship had not come to an end, even though Saul had been rejected as king.

**15:30-31** Saul's second confession is the first point where he did not attempt to deflect blame, but it came too late. Moreover, in seeking honor before Israel's elders, Saul still sought inappropriate statues, even if it is in the context of worship. Samuel did go back with Saul, but the following verses makes it clear that nothing of significance happened. Saul was never truly a man after Yahweh's heart because he never really sought and submitted to the kingship and will of Yahweh. He was more interested in pursuing his own goals and justifying his own actions and voice. Saul was not set up to fail, but his choices led to that outcome.

**15:32-33** Samuel then obeyed the word of Yahweh and killed Agag (1 Sam. 15:2-3). Samuel acted as a judicial executer since Deut. 17:7 required that witnesses to crimes should initiate any execution. Although Samuel was not a direct witness he acted as Yahweh's intermediary.

**15:34-35** Saul's judgment became final when the narrator states that the Samuel as the prophet and word of Yahweh never saw or spoke to Saul again. This closing phrase is deliberately used to prepare for 1 Sam. 28:3-25.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 176.

<sup>62</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 177.

By no longer having the anointing (1 Sam. 16:14) of Yahweh and His guidance through His prophet, Saul was truly now a king like all the other nations. All the kings of the world are left to their own wisdom to guide their nation. Yet the anointed king of Yahweh has His prophet to speak the will of Yahweh to him and guide him in his leading of the nation.



### III. The Reign of Saul and His Conflict with David (16:1-31:13)

Though Saul had been rejected as king, Yahweh had not rejected kingship. This division covers Yahweh's move away from Saul and to His anointing of David. The conflict in this division arises due to there being two anointed kings at the same time. Saul refused to give up his kingship and grew jealous of David and tried to kill him. This created tremendous stress in David's life as he fled Saul and struggled to stay alive. But David also struggled internally with the decision of whether or not to kill Saul.

Yahweh used this conflict between Saul and David to refine David's character and to teach him to come to Him for guidance and to depend upon Him as protector and provider. The narrator uses this conflict to show why Yahweh rejected Saul but chose David. The main difference the narrator emphasizes is that Saul continually failed to submit to the kingship and will of Yahweh, seeking autonomy and justifying his actions in the face of rebuke. David, on the other hand, though he did some very sinful things, ultimately submitted to the kingship and will of Yahweh and repented when confronted with his sin. The narrator is not interested in providing biographical information on David. Rather, the text is theologically driven by the need to demonstrate the reason for Yahweh's choice.

1 Sam. 16-26 are episodic narratives, where each episode is complete in itself and depends upon the completion of the previous episode. These chapters tell of isolated events from David's rise to fame and fleeing the pursuit of Saul.

#### A. David's Rise as the New Anointed King (16:1-17:58)

This section covers the anointing of David and his increasing success in Israel. The narrator wants to demonstrate Yahweh's presence with David and that His presence led to David's success and achievement. This theme runs throughout David's story in Samuel, highlighting that this text is fundamentally shaped by concerns about Yahweh rather than by David's biography and politics, even though such information is shared.<sup>63</sup> The second thing the narrator emphasizes is how others were drawn to David because of Yahweh's presence with David and how he became a blessing to others.

**16:1-5** The movement from 1 Sam. 15 is abrupt, with no indication of a timescale involved. The Word of Yahweh came to Samuel and told him to leave Saul behind and anoint the new king. There is an element of suspense developed by withholding David's name until 1 Sam. 16:13. This fits with the narrator's insistence that appearance is not what matters. Samuel was to go to the insignificant town of Bethlehem, which was also known as Ephrath (Gen. 35:19). It was about 5 miles south of Jerusalem.

Samuel was afraid that Saul would kill him if he found out that Samuel was seeking out a new king to replace Saul. But Yahweh told Samuel to take an animal for sacrifice so that no one would ask questions. A sacrifice is ironic since it was Saul's intention to sacrifice without Samuel that led to his downfall (1 Sam. 13:8-15), but now it would designate Yahweh's successor.

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<sup>63</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 181.

When Samuel came to Bethlehem, he gathered the elders to witness of the anointing of Jesse's son and then went to Jesse's house. Although others were involved, the narrative is not concerned with anyone apart from Jesse's family.

**16:6-10** When Samuel saw Eliab, the oldest son of Jesse, he immediately assumed that he would be king. Samuel made the same mistake as the people of Israel by looking at the appearance of a person. Yahweh made it clear that He chooses people based on their heart. Samuel went to each son of Jesse, and Yahweh rejected each of the sons who were present.

**16:11-13** Samuel then asked Jesse if these were all the “lads” (*na 'ar*) that he had. *Na 'ar* can mean a “son” or “servant.” Samuel used the word to keep it open to Jesse to offer a member of his household rather than a biological son. Jesse mentioned that his youngest son was out tending the sheep. The assumption was that Jesse did not think David was old enough or capable of being king. There is a recurrent theme in the earlier narratives of Yahweh's election of the younger brother. This possibility was not lost on Samuel either, and he was anxious for this last son to be presented. Yahweh consistently chooses those who would have normally been passed over, notably the younger and the barren. David was not a human accident but a divine intention.<sup>64</sup> Even with Israel, Yahweh did not choose Israel because of their power and prestige but rather for their weakness (Deut. 7:6-8). Yahweh's intention had been kingship, but He had kept to His own pattern of choosing of those who were humble rather than powerful.

The narrator points out when David was brought in that he was good looking. It seems odd that the narrator would call attention to David's good looks when this seems to run counter to the theme of the story, and right after Yahweh told Samuel that looks are not what He wants. Saul and Eliab were both described as good looking and were rejected. The Bible very rarely mentions people's looks, but whenever it does note someone's good looks, this trait usually leads to them getting in trouble in some way. And especially in light of the emphasis at Saul's anointing of his good looks, it sets the reader up to be aware that though David may have the kind of heart Yahweh wants, there may also be a flaw in his character and the potential for a failing like Saul.

Yahweh then commanded Samuel to anoint David as king, and Samuel obeyed. Then the Spirit of Yahweh came upon David and remained with him all the days of his life. This statement is contrasted with Saul, who had been rejected by Yahweh and was about to lose the anointing.

**16:14** In contrast to the previous verse, the Spirit of Yahweh left Saul, and an evil spirit came upon him. The Hebrew word *ra'* can mean “evil,” “injurious,” “tormenting,” or “grievous.” The phrase need not refer to an evil, demonic spirit but may refer to the character of the spirit or to its effect upon Saul. In the First Testament, it does not necessarily have a moral force in that the nature of the spirit was evil but rather what it was doing was injurious as in Amos 3:6. This is the way that the word *ra'* should be understood here. In this case, the spirit is viewed as one who is sent to punish Saul and expedite his demise. Since Yahweh is absolutely sovereign over all creation, the spirit is seen as coming from Him. But the narrative still holds Saul responsible for his actions while afflicted (1 Sam. 18:10-11; 19:10), so though this statement is absolute.<sup>65</sup>

**16:15-17** There is no indication of how much time had passed between 1 Sam. 16:14 and 1 Sam. 16:15. Saul's men sought a man who could play the lyre and soothe Saul when the evil spirit

<sup>64</sup> See Walter Brueggemann. *First and Second Samuel*, p. 120.

<sup>65</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 187.

tortured him. They just happened to think of David. Yahweh used the presence of the evil spirit in Saul's life to introduce David to the throne and get him into position to become king.

**16:18-23** The servant uses twice as many words to describe David's military skills as he does his musical ability, plus additional observations that he is discerning in speech, is good looking, and has Yahweh with him. Even though David was a shepherd, he could still have the reputation of being a brave warrior for being adept with the sling and fighting off predators. There are some ironies in how these qualities are presented as good news for Saul, since Yahweh had rejected Saul and the servant hints David may be Saul's replacement.<sup>66</sup> David's military achievements mean that he had some repute, although as the youngest son it would not have changed his status in the family.

Saul seemed to be oblivious to the hints in the servant's speech. What is interesting is that Saul is the first person to speak David's name directly in 1 Samuel. Saul's reference to David locates him in a relatively lowly place where Samuel found him, but the servant's speech had indicated that he was considerably more than that.

At no point had David done anything other than play the harp for Saul. He was brought to the court for this one purpose, but the platform this created meant he was able to demonstrate his ability before the nation.<sup>67</sup>

**17:1-3** The nature of the events that led to the conflict with the Philistines is not mentioned. Previous battles were in Benjamin, but this battle's location was in Judah. Socoh and Azekiah were about 12 miles west of Bethlehem. The Valley of Elah was where the populations of Philistia and Israel met, running up towards Bethlehem. This was a strategic area to control because it enabled access to the good farming land of the coastal plain and the grazing land of the valley. The Israelite highlands were poorer, so these areas were important to both people groups.

**17:4-7** The narrator now introduces Goliath, the Philistines' great warrior from Gath, whose size and battle prowess filled Saul and his army with fear. The Hebrew Masoretic text reads that Goliath's height was "six cubits and a span." The Greek Septuagint, a Qumran manuscript, and Josephus read "four cubits and a span." A cubit was approximately eighteen inches, and a span was half of a cubit. According to the Hebrew Masoretic text, Goliath was about nine feet, six inches tall (NIV, NASB, RSV, CEV, NLT). And according to the Greek Septuagint, Goliath was about six feet, seven inches (NET). This height is not an unrealistic number considering that in the last hundred years, records have confirmed twenty people over the height of eight feet and more than seventy people over seven and a half feet tall. The tallest recorded man was Robert Wadlow (1918–1940 AD) at eight feet, eleven inches.

The average Israelite male of the ancient Near East was about five feet, three inches, so a man measuring seven to nine feet would have been a very impressive height. Saul, being head taller than most Israelites, would have been nearly six feet tall. That is still shorter than Goliath, even at "four cubits and a span." The irony is that Saul, being a head taller and chosen as king to lead the people against the Philistines, would have been the best choice for fighting Goliath (1 Sam. 17:11).

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<sup>66</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 188.

<sup>67</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 190.

Though it is not known exactly how much a shekel weighed, Goliath's body armor would have weighed at least 125 pounds and the tip of his spear 15 pounds, which is impressive. The point is that Goliath was a force to be reckoned with. The narrator describes Goliath as the Philistine wanted to be perceived—a threat too great to be overcome.

**17:8-11** Each day Goliath called to the Israelites and challenged them to a one-on-one fight to determine the victor. If Israel lost, they would become Philistia's slaves, and if Israel lost, Philistia would give up the land. Single combat to resolve combat was not common, though known among the Hittites. There is also no guarantee that the Philistines would honor such an agreement. It could have merely been Goliath's taunting of Israel.

Israel "serves" Saul, but victory over Goliath means the Philistines would serve Israel. Goliath's speech subtly suggests discontent with Saul as ruler and an opportunity for freedom, with defeat simply meaning a change of master. Goliath's speech, beginning and ending with Saul, demonstrates his failure as king. Mention of Saul is important. He was properly armed (1 Sam. 13:22) and was tall (1 Sam. 10:23) and was chosen to defeat Israel's enemies (1 Sam. 8:20). While Saul, the rejected king, stood by idly waiting for someone to take up Goliath's challenge, David, the new king in waiting and chosen by Yahweh, would demonstrate the faith, courage, and ingenuity that Israel needed in a leader. For Goliath to "defy" (*haraph*) Israel's army implies disdainful contempt.

**17:12-22** Though the narrator has already introduced David and his family in 1 Sam. 16:1-3, there Samuel was the central character in the narrative. Here David is officially introduced, and only at this point does he become the focal point of the narrative.

Jesse's three oldest sons had joined the army, which explains why David was at the battle. When he was not tending to the flocks, David was providing food for his brothers and news of the brothers to his father. The point is that David was not seeking to join the battle. David was a shepherd who gradually becomes more important as the narrative proceeds. David leaving the sheep and cargo in others' capable hands shows that he is leaving these things behind and moving on to kingship.

**17:23-27** While David was at the battlefield, Goliath came out for his usual taunting. Again, Israel was filled with fear, but this time the narrator adds that they ran away. This alludes to Israel's earlier defeat at Aphek and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam. 4:10, 16-17). This is an ironic contrast with Jonathan's earlier victory (1 Sam. 14:22). There is a contrast between David hearing Goliath and Israel running.

The men informed David that Saul was offering a reward for the person who could defeat Goliath. Saul would give wealth, tax exemption, and his daughter as a reward. David's first words in the narrative present an ambiguity. On one hand, David shows self-interest and greed in asking what the reward will be, after already being told what it was, to make sure what he had been told was true. Other godly warriors, like Jonathan, did not fight Israel's enemy for a reward. On the other hand, David shows a great concern for Yahweh's reputation. By referring to Yahweh as the "living God," David was not saying that God was "alive" but that He was actively present in the life of Israel. The men then repeated to David what the reward was. By referring to Goliath as uncircumcised, David was describing him as one who was not a part of the Abrahamic Covenant and not of the people of Yahweh (Gen. 17:9-14). David was the first one to introduce a theological interpretation—that this uncircumcised Philistine had defied the army of the living God. David's speech exposed the fallacy of accepting things as the Philistine presented them in

1 Sam. 17:4-11. This was not an unbeatable enemy. This was someone who had set himself against Yahweh.<sup>68</sup>

**17:28-30** When Eliab heard David, he immediately accused David of being irresponsible and prideful. In one sense, Eliab's failure to understand David's role as Israel's deliverer confirms Yahweh's rejection of him (1 Sam. 16:7). What Samuel could not have known about Eliab's heart was revealed in his misunderstanding of David's heart. Yet at the same time, Eliab's comments come right after the self-interest and greed David had just demonstrated. Then David immediately turned and asked about the reward again. The repetition of David's interest in the reward emphasizes his self-interest and similarity to Jephthah, who delivered Israel only for a reward (Judg. 11:1-11).

**17:31-37** David's words were reported to Saul, and David was brought before him. The king and his replacement were face to face. David confidently declared that he would do the right thing and defeat Goliath. Saul was doubtful as he pointed out the contrast between David, a young man, and Goliath, who was a warrior. Saul continued to accept Goliath's portrayal, whereas David saw the situation in the light of his understanding of Yahweh.

David thus instructed Saul about Yahweh, and so demonstrated that he was taking on the leadership role that the people had desired from the king (1 Sam. 8:20). David stated that even though he was a shepherd, he had defeated lions and bears (more fearsome than Goliath) with his bare hands through the power of Yahweh. Goliath was no different than these animals because he had defied Yahweh. Thus, in the same way Yahweh would give him victory over Goliath. There is an imagery here of David being a great shepherd (Yahweh's regent) who takes care of the sheep (Israel) and rescues them from the mouth of the bear and lion (Philistines) through the power of Yahweh. Goliath was Yahweh's enemy and would be defeated by Yahweh. What Saul could not recognize David made clear. Victory for Israel did not lie in the best military technology or the greatest physical strength. Just like Jonathan (1 Sam. 14:6), David believed that Yahweh did not need an army to defeat the enemy. Here David showed a great faith in Yahweh and a desire to deliver Israel, unlike his previous demonstration of self-interest.

Saul granted David permission to fight in the presence of Yahweh. Only in response to David's speech did Saul express himself theologically, though his words were purely conventional.

**17:38-40** David had just told Saul that he had defeated the bear and lion with his bare hands with the power of Yahweh, and yet Saul began to dress David up in his armor and weapons. Saul had not grasped David's point. Saul assumed that if one wants to fight a heavily armed giant, then one should go out heavily armed.

Yet David could not operate efficiently in the armor because he was not used to it. Nowhere does the text describe David as a little boy or small or that the armor did not fit him. Nothing in the narrative suggests that Saul would have been so foolish as to put David in something so oversized for him. Since the armor apparently fit David, he must have been relatively tall, since Saul was a head taller than most Israelites. The text states that David was not used to the armor since he was a shepherd. David was a lad (*na 'ar*) and lacked military experience. But the narrator's focus was never on David's size, rather on the means by which he gained victory. Goliath was a battle-experienced warrior, equipped with the latest military technology. David

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<sup>68</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 198.

had faith in Yahweh, the sovereign king of creation. David instead took what was familiar, the gear of a shepherd.

**17:41-44** Goliath and David, opposites in every way, faced off on the battle field. Goliath looked down on David and was offended that David would come to attack him with sticks. Goliath then cursed David by his gods. The battle was not merely between David and Goliath but between the competing religious beliefs. Do the Philistine gods (1 Sam. 5:1-5) have any authority? The point is not that the little guy defeated the giant but that Yahweh's authority and power are superior to the pagan gods.

**17:45-47** David's speech makes the point of the narrator. It does not matter what military and technological achievements Goliath came with; David came with presence of Yahweh of hosts, referring to Yahweh's angelic army (1 Sam. 1:3, 11; 4:4; 15:2). Yahweh does not depend upon military might and technology to achieve victory. David understood that his victory was to be a demonstration to the nations that Yahweh is superior to all the other gods. David had grasped the special nature of Israel's role before the nations in a way that Saul had never grasped; Israel existed as a witness to the nations of the reality of who Yahweh is. Yet David also said that he would cut Goliath's head off, which was a Canaanite practice.

**17:48-51a** Without hesitation David quickly slung a stone and sank it into Goliath's head, killing him. Goliath fell face down like the statue of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:3-4).<sup>69</sup> David killing Goliath with only his sling and not with a sword highlights the central theological themes from David's speeches. Everyone including Goliath expected close-quarters, hand-to-hand combat. David refused to play by the rules and "shot" Goliath from a distance. David defied the conventions of fighting, acted contrary to expectations, and in so doing displayed ingenuity and wit.

Then David cut off Goliath's head with Goliath's sword. The question is why, when Goliath was already dead? Sometimes the head was used as proof of a kill in the ancient world, but everyone was there to see that David was the victor.

**17:51b-54** This time the Philistines ran, and Israel and Judah chased them and killed them all the way to Gath in Philistine territory. Yet the men are not described as Israel alone but as Israel and Judah. Already a rift has appeared in Israel: between Israel, who would be more likely to support Saul their king, and Judah, who would support their new hero, David of Judah. This rift will continue to widen until the kingdom split after Solomon's death (1 Kgs. 11:9-13).

Meanwhile David took the head of Goliath to Jerusalem. The city of Jerusalem was not captured until David was king and forty years old (2 Sam. 5:6-10). That means David carried the head of Goliath around as a trophy for over twenty years. This is why he cut off the head of Goliath; the self-interest and the pride of David come out again. Goliath's sword ended up in the tabernacle in Nob (1 Sam. 21:8-9), and David put Goliath's armor in his tent.

The narrator has presented David as a great man of faith in Yahweh but as one who also has an issue with pride and self-interest. He was not humble and sacrificial like Moses, nor was he completely self-serving and oblivious to Yahweh like Saul. David was complicated. He was a man after Yahweh's own heart but also had his own interests in mind. The narrator has presented a person who is relatable in his character, and from this point the question is what part of his character would dominate him as the narrative goes on.

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<sup>69</sup> See M. K. George. "Constructing Identity in I Samuel 17," p. 407.

**17:55-58** As Saul watched David, he asked his general Abner whose son David was. This question is important because of the offer of the reward (1 Sam. 17:25) that clearly was not discussed in his interview with David. But one also wonders whether Saul wanted to know David's family in order to give David a reward and bring him into his army or because he feared what David could mean for his kingship. Is David the replacement Samuel spoke of (1 Sam. 15:28)? Saul knew that Yahweh was taking the kingdom from him, but he did not know yet who it would be.

David had already been introduced to Saul in 1 Sam. 16:17-23, so it may seem odd that Saul did not know here who David was. But Saul might not have been asking who David was; rather, he could have been asking for the identity of David's father, since he did promise tax exemption to the father's family of the one who killed Goliath (1 Sam. 17:25). This can be seen in Gen. 24:23, where the servant uses a similar expression in addressing Rebekah. His primary concern was to find out the identity of her father, as her response indicates. Likewise, Saul could have easily forgotten Jesse's name.

Abner brought David before Saul for inquiry, and David was still carrying the head of Goliath. David remained opaque to Saul, and Saul knew a threat when he saw one. Like Jonathan conquering the Philistines when Saul was supposed to do it. Saul was unsuccessfully seeking more information about David's identity instead of celebrating what Yahweh had just done in working out His purposes for His chosen people. David's knowledge of Yahweh transformed his actions, whereas for Saul it had no visible effect.<sup>70</sup>

David's killing of Goliath takes one verse, whereas his speeches to Saul and Goliath take many verses and lay out his theological understanding of the events. Thus, the narrative's emphasis is not on the overcoming of the powerful foe but on developing the theological point of Yahweh's sovereignty and desire to bless the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). David's understanding of this is what marks him as different from Saul and why David was more likely to submit to the kingship of Yahweh. This is why David had been chosen.

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<sup>70</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 203.

## B. David Flees from Saul who Is Trying to Kill Him (18:1-20:42)

As David began to succeed more and more and become more popular because Yahweh was with him, Saul's jealousy began to grow. Eventually Saul's jealousy turned to fear and then hatred for David. Saul's response shows how much he was out of alignment with Yahweh's plan and direction for the kingdom. Yet despite this, Yahweh continued to take care of David. Yahweh's presence with David is demonstrated in this narrative rather than announced.

1 Sam. 18-26 are episodic narratives, where each episode is complete in itself and depends upon the completion of the previous episode.

**18:1-4** Jonathan and David being very much alike immediately became one in spirit, and Jonathan loved David as himself. The verb “love” in these accounts is not so much an emotion or expression of friendship as it is a commitment of loyalty to David's political position. The political dimension is essential.<sup>71</sup> This is emphasized by Jonathan's action of making a covenant with David. The content of the covenant is never mentioned, but that it was political is apparent from the context. The robe (*me'il*) represents Jonathan's status as the heir to the throne, and yet he passed it to David. Unlike Saul, who was oblivious to the will of Yahweh, Jonathan was so in tune with Yahweh's agenda that he immediately recognized it when he saw it in David as Yahweh's anointed and then submitted to the will of Yahweh. Jonathan also gave David his sword, one of two in Israel (1 Sam. 13:22), bow, and belt, which were also symbols of status.

Meanwhile, Saul kept David close to him. The question is still why. This is a short summary of a larger cycle of events, so the timescale is more general than it initially seems.

**18:5-9** David was successful in every mission he went on, unlike Saul. The other soldiers and officers were pleased with David. Saul responded by making David an officer. Even the women who came out to greet Saul upon his return from battle praised David with greater victories than Saul their king. This greatly upset Saul, who was king but was being undermined by a young soldier. He feared that if they were willing to give David more praise, then maybe they would give him the kingdom as well. This might have been the beginning of Saul figuring out that David was his replacement. Unlike Jonathan, Saul was not willing to accept what Yahweh was doing with David and did not submit to the will of Yahweh.

**18:10-11** The next day, the evil spirit came upon Saul again and he began to prophesy. Most English translations have “raved” here, but this loses the force of the parallelism with 1 Sam. 10:10 and 1 Sam. 19:23. What he prophesied is not clear, and it does not mean that what he said was accurate or relevant. Saul then tried to kill David twice by throwing a spear at David, but David eluded him. The contrast here is that Yahweh was with David but not with Saul.

**18:12-16** Saul saw what everyone else seemed to know, that Yahweh was with David and not him. But for Saul, the realization was destructive rather than celebratory. So Saul demoted David from a position of leadership within his army to make him a commander of a regiment in his army. This would put David back in the thick of the battles and make it more likely than as an officer for him to die in war. Saul knew that he could not kill David outright since he was so loved by the people, but David could die in battle. The irony is that Saul saw this as a demotion, but it put David in closer contact with the general population who loved David. Likewise, David was fighting the Philistines, which was the job that Saul was supposed to be doing (1 Sam. 9:16). Yahweh gave David greater success, and all of Israel—those who would have been more likely

<sup>71</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 208.

to support Saul—and Judah loved David. Saul could have had everything David had if he had just trusted and submitted to Yahweh.

**18:17-19** Saul had not honored his previous bargain of giving his daughter to David in marriage for killing Goliath (1 Sam. 17:25). Now Saul was offering his daughter Merab to David in marriage in a hope that it would get him killed. If David took on marriage that brought him into the royal family, he would be engaged in many more battles with the Philistines and would likely be killed. David did not take the offer, for he did not see himself worthy of being a part of the royal family. One wonders why David rejected this offer when previously on the battlefield, before he killed Goliath, he repeatedly asked what the reward was. David's decline phrased as a question leaves some ambiguity to what he really meant. Merab was then given to another in marriage.

**18:20-23** Saul then discovered that his other daughter Michal was in love with David. This is the only time in the First Testament that a woman's love for a man is mentioned. Most likely it is not specifically romance but political loyalty. Saul appealed to flattery in order to entice David into marrying Michal. This time when David expressed his "unworthiness," he added that he was just a poor man. Here the truth is revealed: it was not that David was not interested in being a part of the royal family but that he that he could not afford the dowry that would be required for the king's daughter.

**18:24-27** Once Saul realized that the dowry was all that was stopping David, he made it clear that he did not want money but the foreskins of a hundred Philistines—hoping this would get David killed in the attempt. The fact that David's position changed so drastically at this new dowry shows that humility was never present with David. David sought to be a part of royal family in order to further secure his position for the throne. David not only killed Philistines, but he brought back two hundred foreskins. This excess beyond what Saul had asked shows a pride and arrogance in David, the complete opposite of how he presented himself at the beginning of the narrative. Now Saul was stuck; he had made the offer and now had to follow through with what he had promised. In doing so, additional authority was granted to David.

**18:28-30** To Saul's dread, David did not die at the hands of the Philistines, and he realized that Yahweh was with David. This is why Saul's fear of David increased and why he set himself as David's permanent enemy. The first one to love David was the first to become his enemy.

**19:1-3** Saul no longer cared about making David's death subtle, and he commanded Jonathan and all his attendants to kill David. Saul probably thought that Jonathan would have seen David as a threat to him being king and would go along with the assignation. But Jonathan and David had made a covenant with each other, and he warned David.

**19:4-7** Jonathan spoke to his father and spoke well of David, how Yahweh was with David and all the things that David had done for Saul in his repeated success against the Philistines. Saul was persuaded and swore an oath that he would never kill David. Saul's last oath was his folly (1 Sam. 14:24), making this oath suspect, but Jonathan was convinced, and David returned to the palace.

**19:8-10** Again war broke out, and David was successful. Though Yahweh being with David is not mentioned, it is clear from the previous events that this was why David was successful. In contrast, Saul continued to be tormented by the evil spirit, and unlike before Saul did not prophesy. This time Saul was calmly seated on his throne, but his spear in his hand showed that

he was ready for violence. Once again Saul tried to kill David, and David eluded him. But this time David fled and would not come back again.

**19:11-13** Saul sent men to David's house to kill him as he came out in the morning. But Michal chose to side with David and help him escape out the window. David's house must have been on the town wall. Michal placed an idol in David's bed to deceive Saul's men. The question is where did she get the idol? There is no evidence of David ever worshiping idols throughout his life, but why did he allow her to have one in his house? In this way Michal and Rachel are linked together (Gen. 31:31-35).

**19:14-17** Michal told Saul's men that David was sick, allowing David time to get away. When Saul sent them back to kill David, he learned that he had been deceived by his own daughter. Michal lied and said that David had threatened to kill her. It is clear that Michal was not a godly woman and would not have been a good influence on David.

**19:18-24** David fled first to Samuel the prophet in Ramah, which was 8 miles northwest of Saul's palace. Unlike Saul, David went straight to Yahweh's prophet for guidance.

When Saul sent men to Ramah to kill David, Samuel and the prophets opposed them, and the Spirit of Yahweh came upon them to prevent them from finding David. Saul sent men to kill David three different times with the same result of them prophesying. Here, Yahweh used the gift of prophecy to hinder the men rather than reveal Himself to them since they were opposing His anointed king. Finally, Saul came himself and he too began to prophecy under the influence of the Spirit of Yahweh. But this time he humiliated himself by stripping down naked, and he lay there for an entire day and night (Gen. 2:24). In Sam. 10:10, the Spirit of Yahweh's presence on Saul proved that he was Yahweh's anointed king, while here it proved that he was opposing Yahweh, because the Spirit of Yahweh prevented him from murdering David.

**20:1-4** David went back to Jonathan and asked him why Saul was trying to kill him. Jonathan was operating on the basis of his father's oath from 1 Sam. 19:6 and expressed both shock and outrage at the suggestion, because he considered himself to be Saul's inner cabinet. Yet Saul knew about Jonathan and David's covenant and hid his plans from Jonathan. The narrator does not explain why Jonathan seemed to need convincing of his father's intentions, because the key point is Jonathan's loyalty to David in the face of the obligations owed to his father (Ex. 20:12).

**20:5-9** The New Moon Feast is the month's new beginning, when the celebration and sacrifices were required (Num. 10:10; 28:11-15). Celebrating a feast might suggest that it was a new moon as well as a Sabbath.<sup>72</sup> Though David was married to Saul's daughter, it would be reasonable for him to go to his family in Bethlehem to celebrate the New Moon Feast. David's plan was to have Jonathan tell Saul this. If this was acceptable to Saul, then David was wrong about Saul and David would return. However, if Saul got unreasonably angry about David being with his family for the "holidays," then something was definitely not right. David then stated that if he was truly guilty of something that deserved death, then he would rather have Jonathan instead of Saul kill him. Unlike Saul, Jonathan showed his loyalty to David by swearing that he would never kill David even though he had every political motivation to do so.

**20:10-17** Although Jonathan and David had a covenant, Jonathan recognized that their commitment had to be worked out beyond the two of them, reaching to their descendants (1 Sam. 20:42). David made a covenant with Jonathan, vowing that when he became king, he would not

<sup>72</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 225.

kill the family of Jonathan to secure his own throne. David would treat Jonathan's line with the same loving kindness that he had shown to Jonathan himself.

**20:18-23** Jonathan told David that if Saul was favorable toward David, then the next morning when he came out to shoot his arrows, he would make sure that they fell short of the target—a signal to David that it was safe to return. But if it was not safe to return, he would make sure the arrows went past the target to signal David to run away.

**20:24-29** When Saul saw that David was not at the New Moon Feast, he assumed David was ritually unclean and could not make it, according to the Levitical Law (Lev. 11:39-40; Num. 19:11). One night's absence needed no concern, but when David was not there the second day, Saul pressed Jonathan more for answers. Saul referred to David as "the son of Jesse," a phrase that indicates David lacked Jonathan's status and was below Jonathan. Jonathan told Saul that David was in Bethlehem with his family for the New Moon Feast.

**20:30-31** Saul then became furious with Jonathan and began to insult him and use coarse language. The Hebrew reads "son of a perverse woman of rebelliousness." But this fails to capture the force of Saul's angry tirade. A better understanding of the phrase would be "bastard of a wayward woman" (HALOT 796) or "you stupid son of a b\*tch" (meaning no offense to those reading this). That Saul would address his son Jonathan with such language, not to mention his readiness to kill his own son over this friendship with David (1 Sam. 20:33), reveals the extreme depth of Saul's jealousy and hatred of David.

Saul insisted that Jonathan's failure was that he had not understood that siding with David meant his own kingdom could never be established. This is a core difference between Saul and Jonathan. Saul had set himself against Yahweh's will, opposing both of Yahweh's judgments against him (1 Sam. 13:14; 15:28). Though Saul followed the ritual elements of belief in Yahweh, he effectively declared himself to be against Yahweh. Here Saul also reveals he knows that David would be king. Saul called David a "son of death" (1 Sam. 26:16; 2 Sam. 12:5; and the similar "man of death" in 2 Sam. 19:29; 1 Kgs. 2:26). It is more forceful than "he deserves death." It suggests that David had already reached the state of death, in that judgment had been passed on him. David was already dead to Saul.

**20:32-34** Jonathan responded by asking the rational question of what David had done to be an enemy of Saul and what he had really done to try to take the kingdom. Saul had accepted Jonathan's argument for David before (1 Sam. 19:4-7), so Jonathan followed the same strategy here. Saul knew that his kingdom could not endure, though he did not know that David would refuse to claim it by force. He thought that David's hand was out to kill him, but he would end up dying by his own hand.

Saul responded by throwing a spear at his son in an attempt to kill him. This reveals the complete irrationality and lack of love in Saul. Jonathan's grief shows that he did not truly know his father and that he was not always brought in on his father's plans. Jonathan had been publicly humiliated by his father. Jonathan would not abandon his father (1 Sam. 31:1-2), but neither could he allow an attempt on David's life. Jonathan followed Yahweh's costly will, where Saul did not. From this point on, Jonathan would not be mentioned in connection to Saul until his death (1 Sam. 31:2).

**20:35-42** The next morning Jonathan signaled David to flee with the overshot arrows as they had previously discussed. Realizing that he would never see Jonathan again, David risked coming out

of hiding in order to say goodbye to his close friend. Jonathan reminded and encouraged David that Yahweh would be with them and their descendants. Jonathan's conclusion is important, stressing that their parting expressed their respective faithfulness to Yahweh and also their future dependence on Him.

### C. Saul Pursues David (21:1-23:29)

In this section, Saul moves from an intent to kill David motivated by fear to a madman who because of his paranoia becomes a danger to all those in his kingdom. David, now in exile, shows himself to be a resourceful figure who is determined to survive. However, in the beginning he did not trust in Yahweh but depended on his own intelligence and resources. It was not until he exhausted all of his resources and they failed to protect him that he finally begins to go to Yahweh and depend on Him in 1 Sam. 24.

**21:1-3** David fled to Nob, which was about a mile from Jerusalem and 8 miles from Gibeath, close enough for David to reach in a day before news of him becoming an outlaw reached Saul. Ahimelech, the priest and descendant of Eli, was afraid when he saw that David, Saul's warrior, had come alone. Perhaps, knowing Saul's mental and emotional state, he feared being killed. David lied to Ahimelech about being on a secret mission from Saul and having men with him. Having fled with nothing, David asked for something to eat.

**21:4-6** Ahimelech answered that he had only the ceremonial bread on the table of showbread. This was the bread that the priests were to bake weekly and keep in the tabernacle as a symbol of Yahweh's provision for Israel. At the end of the week, only the descendants of Aaron could eat the bread (Lev. 24:5-9). Those who were common (David) could not partake of things that were holy (bread). However, Ahimelech, seeing David was in need, indicated his willingness to allow a broader interpretation of *holy*. Ahimelech was willing to make an exception if David could assure him that his men had remained sexually pure. It was not uncommon for soldiers in the ancient Near East to have sex with women during war and while they were away from home. Sexual intercourse made one unclean (Lev. 15:18), and sexual abstinence was an element of ritual preparation for warfare, an indication of holiness (Josh. 3:5; 2 Sam. 11). David swore that and he and all the men were sexually clean as on all occasions. So Ahimelech gave David the bread.

**21:6-8** The narrator points out the fact that Doeg the Edomite, Saul's senior shepherd, was there and saw that David was with Ahimelech. The title "senior shepherd" may be a military title.<sup>73</sup> The presence of Doeg the Edomite becomes significant in 1 Sam. 22:6-23.

David then asked if Ahimelech had a weapon, already knowing he did since David had taken the sword of Goliath—meaning that he would have been the one who gave it to Ahimelech. This shows that David's primary reason for being there was to get the sword, especially since he could have gotten food anywhere.

**21:10-15** David then fled to Achish king of Gath in Philistine territory for protection. David, knowing that Saul's men were everywhere in Israelite territory, took a risk in going to Philistine territory, hoping that no one would recognize him there; but he was wrong. The problem is that David was outside the Promised Land and not trusting in Yahweh to take care of him in the land of blessing. When David heard that the Philistines were calling him king and recounting his military success against them, he got scared and did not approach Achish. Fearing for his life, he pretended to be a madman so that people would leave him alone and he could escape. When Achish heard that David was mad, he did not see David as a threat or want to waste his time with another madman.

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<sup>73</sup> See S. Z. Aster. "What Was Doeg the Edomite's Title? Textual Emendation versus a Comparative Approach," pp. 257-361.

**22:1-2** How David escaped Philistine territory is not mentioned. The cave of Adullam was in the territory of Judah close to the Philistine border. Given Saul's past ineffectiveness against the Philistines, he might have been unlikely to pursue David that close to Philistia. Other people who owed money or were discontent with Saul's reign gathered around him. The fact that there were 400 men, plus their families—a number that would increase to 600 (1 Sam. 23:13)—shows that there was considerable dissatisfaction with Saul, especially within Judah. David may have gained dissatisfied Philistines as well (2 Sam. 15:18).

**22:3-4** David then fled to Moab, the nation east of Judah. David had a Moabite background (Ruth 4:13-17) and may have sought refuge with relatives who lived there. David asked the king of Moab if he would allow his parents to find refuge in Moab, to which the king agreed. David's speech to the king of Moab shows that he was now waiting on Yahweh to lead him. He had discovered that his resourcefulness was not effective. Then the prophet told David to go back to Judah where he belonged, in the Promised Land. The emphasis on Yahweh's input into David's life from here is accentuated by inclusion of a comment from the prophet Gad. Gad is rarely mentioned (2 Sam. 24:11; 1 Chr. 29:29), but he represents a new element in David's life—that he was now subject to prophetic leading, vital for an effective rule as an Israelite king.<sup>74</sup> So David went to the forest of Hereth in Judah. David's prompt acceptance of it immediately sets him apart from Saul.

**22:6-8** How Saul knew that David and his men had been discovered is not mentioned. There is a hint of coming violence as the narrator states that Saul had his spear in hand. Saul accused his attendants of conspiracy against him. He called them "sons of Benjamin," suggesting that he had a narrow power base. Saul asked if David would give them all the things that Samuel had previously warned the nation against (1 Sam. 8:12-14). In claiming to be a just king, Saul revealed how little he understood the role. Saul intended the questions to undermine his attendants but showed that he did not know what a real king was supposed to offer his people. Thus, the narrator suggests that there was no reason to support Saul.

**22:9-10** Doeg the Edomite informed Saul that he saw David with Ahimelech the priest. He omitted David's lies to Ahimelech, added that Ahimelech inquired of Yahweh for David, and emphasized that Ahimelech gave David the sword of Goliath, manipulating the truth to agree with Saul's delusions of conspiracy and making Ahimelech look like he was colluding with David against Saul.<sup>75</sup>

**22:11-15** Saul then brought Ahimelech and all the priests of his father Ahitub's household to his palace for questioning. Saul asked why Ahimelech had conspired against him with David. He then made David out to be actively trying to ambush Saul and take the kingdom by force.

Ahimelech responded by stating that David was Saul's most loyal servant, that it was Saul who had trusted and lifted David up as his son-in-law and the head of his body guard, and that there were many times Ahimelech had inquired of Yahweh for David. Ahimelech then stated that in light of all the above, he had no idea that Saul wanted David dead. Both of Ahimelech's questions were rhetorical, allowing him to avoid accusing the king of making a wrong accusation.

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<sup>74</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 237.

<sup>75</sup> See J. P. Fokkelman. *Narrative, Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. Vol 2, p. 389.

**22:16-17** Ahimelech's question about inquiring of Yahweh is grammatically ambiguous, and although he meant it as a denial, Saul interpreted it as admission. In the ancient Near East, all divination oracles had to be reported to the king. However, Israel's laws did not record any such requirement of disclosure, and their emphasis on the priesthood's independence would probably argue against its validity.<sup>76</sup>

Saul saw this as conspiracy and sentenced Ahimelech and his entire house to death. Saul's sentencing was a violation of Yahweh's Law. First, according to the Law, there had to be at least two witnesses of good standing, evidence, and a trial before ten elders. Second, it was unjust to sentence all of Ahimelech's family to death for the supposed crime of Ahimelech. Third, these were the holy priests of Yahweh whom Saul was going to put to death. Saul should have at least consulted the prophet of Yahweh. The narrator's emphasis is not that Saul was crazy, but that he was acting according to his own law. Saul was becoming a classical ancient Near Eastern king—dictatorial and oppressive—of which Samuel had warned against (1 Sam. 8:10-17).<sup>77</sup>

Saul then commanded his men to kill the “priests of Yahweh.” The fact that he said this and did not hesitate shows how much he stood in opposition to Yahweh. Saul had characterized their action as having put their “hand” with David, yet the soldiers refused to put their “hand” against the priests. The soldiers were not willing to oppose Yahweh make themselves His enemy.

**22:18-19** Saul commanded Doeg the Edomite to kill the priests. Saul's command to Doeg the Edomite made two changes to his previous command. First, the second imperative changes from “kill” to “execute.” Thus, he shows that he believed he was operating as a just ruler. Second, he omitted the “of Yahweh” when referring to the priests to ignore their connection with Yahweh and thus make his actions more acceptable. Saul had all the men (eighty-five priests), women, children, and animals killed in Nob. This was holy war terminology. What Saul could not do to the Amalekites he now did to the priests of Yahweh.

The narrator emphasizes that they “bore the linen ephod,” a phrase alluding to 1 Sam. 2:28, where the man of God announced Yahweh's judgment on the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:30-33). This was a fulfillment of Yahweh's judgment against the house of Eli that all his descendants would be cut off from serving as priests and not see old age. Even when Saul acted like an ancient Near Eastern despot, he still achieved Yahweh's announced purposes. However, he acted autonomously for the sake of his own vengeance and did it without a direct command from Yahweh. And he carried it out on the women and children and animals, which the prophecy of Yahweh did not include. The narrator changes the verb again so that it is no longer is “execute” but “vengeance.” Therefore, it was evil and sinful, and he would be held accountable by Yahweh for his crime. Saul was a jealous king whose revenge was mindless. One of the key insights of the First Testament is the tension it retains between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, insisting that humans have free choice and are responsible for their choice but also that Yahweh will accomplish His will.

**22:20-21** However, Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, got away and went to David. Saul could never find David, but one young priest could. This shows Yahweh's hand of protection over David. Abiathar's report to David of what happened changed the report of the slaughter by introducing the verb *hārag* (“killed”). Although it can refer to judicial executions (Ex. 32:27;

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<sup>76</sup> See J. J. M. Roberts. “The Legal Basis for the Slaughter of the Priests of Nob.”

<sup>77</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 243.

Lev. 20:15), this is rare and most often refers to indiscriminate revenge killing (Gen. 34:25; 2 Sam. 3:30).<sup>78</sup>

David responded by taking responsibility for the actions of Saul. He was the one who had lied to Ahimelech, setting him up to be a target, and had seen Doeg the Edomite, knowing who he was but doing nothing to stop him or warn anyone. Thus, David was guilty for the deaths at Nob as well. This shows the difference between Saul and David. Whereas Saul directly murdered the people of Nob without remorse and justified his actions, David felt remorse for his indirect responsibility and owned the responsibility and guilt of the crime.

**23:1-5** Keilah was a city in Judah about two miles south of Adullam, in an area disputed with the Philistines, which was thus prone to raids. David found out that Keilah was being attacked and immediately inquired of Yahweh whether he should go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah. This is the first time the narrator has recorded David inquiring of Yahweh. Yahweh commanded David to go and save Keilah. But David's men were afraid and questioned David. So, David went to Yahweh again, and Yahweh responded with the same answer, but this time assured him that He would deliver the Philistines into David's "hands" (*yād*).

Unlike Saul, David obeyed Yahweh and did everything he was commanded. He saved the city of Keilah and inflicted heavy casualties on the Philistines. Even though David had no responsibility for the city of Keilah, he was beginning to act the way a king of Yahweh should act, and he delivered them. This is in contrast to Saul, who had just killed innocent Israelite priests for his own purpose. David was saving innocent Israelite people from the hands of the Philistines. Also, it was Saul's obsession with David that allowed the Philistines to attack Keilah. And it was Saul, as king, who failed to protect them.

**23:6** The narrator states that David was able to inquire of Yahweh because Abiathar brought the ephod with the Urim and Thummim when he fled Saul. Since Abiathar arrived when David was in Keilah, David could not have used the ephod previous to this moment, which would explain the fear of David and his men and why he had not inquired of Yahweh until this moment. David had royal access to Yahweh through the priest and the ephod.

**23:7-8** When Saul discovered that David was in Keilah, he wrongly concluded that Yahweh had given David into his "hands" (*yād*). After being rejected as king and after all he had done, he actually believed that Yahweh was with him. Saul did not delight in the fact that the Philistines were defeated; he saw only the possibility that he might kill David. Unlike David, who had the ephod, Saul was completely dependent upon human information. He might speak to Yahweh, but had no knowledge from Yahweh.

**23:9-14** In contrast, the narrator states that David knew of Saul's plan—not that he was told of it. Like before, David immediately inquired of Yahweh and asked Him if Saul was coming for him and if the people of Keilah would hand him over. Yahweh answered yes to both questions. David took his men and left Keilah, saving them from whatever irrational wrath Saul might bring upon them. David now had 600 men. David was not too difficult to find, which is clear by all those who came to follow him. Yahweh continued to protect David from Saul.

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<sup>78</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 244-245.

**23:15-18** The narrator continues to develop the contrast between Saul, who was determined to kill David, and Jonathan, who had sided with David, because this was obedience to Yahweh who had chosen David.

**23:19-28** Where Keilah never had the chance to carry out their betrayal of David, the betrayal of Ziph was initiated. The narrator is showing that the danger for David was increasing. Saul now had an exact location of where he could find David. Saul then got closer and closer to capturing David. Right when Saul was about to capture David, Yahweh used a Philistine attack against Israel to draw Saul away from David so David could get away. No matter what David went through, Yahweh continued to protect and take care of David.

## D. David Spares Two Fools (24:1-26:25)

This section covers David's encounter with Nabal, whom he almost killed. This incident with Nabal is sandwiched between the two incidents where David spared Saul's life. Both Saul and Nabal are portrayed as fools who are trying to harm David or were unwilling to care for him. Both came dangerously close to death at the hands of David only to be saved by David's own conscience or another's conscience (Abigail). It is these events that bring David to a much fuller understanding of and submission to Yahweh's plan and timing for the direction of the kingdom of Yahweh. By 1 Sam. 26, David knew that violence was not how he would achieve Yahweh's purpose, however providential the situation might seem (1 Sam. 26:9-11). Thus, the narrator also prepares for the incidents in which David responds to those who admit having used violence against kings (2 Sam. 1:1-16; 4:5-12).<sup>79</sup>

**24:1-7** David fled to Engedi, which was on the western coast of the Dead Sea. Saul took three regiments of men in order to capture David. Seeking a place to relieve himself, Saul just happened to go into the same cave in which David and his men were hiding. Had Saul looked, he could have found David; instead, David found him. David's men interpreted this as Yahweh delivering Saul into David's "hands" (*yād*) and encouraged David to kill Saul.

As the true anointed king of Israel who was responsible for maintaining justice, David could have easily justified the killing of Saul as a just act of judgment for his crimes against Israel. Yet when David got close to Saul, he merely cut off the corner of Saul's "robe" (*me 'il*). The corner fringe of a robe was a symbol of authority. Here the narrator alludes to 1 Sam. 15:27-28, when Saul tore off the corner of Samuel's "robe" (*me 'il*), which was symbolic of Yahweh taking Saul's kingship away. Here David as the true anointed king symbolically took Saul's authority away.

David's conscience was stricken for removing the corner of Saul's robe because he knew that he did not have the right, without Yahweh's command, to remove Saul's authority as king over Israel. Yahweh was the one who had chosen and anointed Saul and then had rejected him, so only Yahweh had the right to remove Saul completely. If Yahweh can anoint two men, then Yahweh must resolve the resulting conflict. This is what made David stand out as a man after Yahweh's own heart: his willingness to submit to the authority of Yahweh as sovereign king over Israel.

**24:8-15** David then presented himself to Saul outside the cave and revealed to Saul that Yahweh had delivered him into his "hands" (*yād*) and that he could have killed him but did not. Therefore, there was no basis for those who claimed David was trying to kill Saul. David picked up his men's argument about Yahweh's providence and presented it in a new light. David then proved his claim by showing Saul the corner of the robe in his "hand" (*yād*), showing, therefore, that nothing in his "hand" (*yād*) would indicate he was guilty of rebellion against Saul. David then stated that Yahweh would be the judge of Saul for what he had done to David, but David's "hand" (*yād*) would not touch Saul. David stated that he was trusting Yahweh to be his judge and to deliver him from the "hand" (*yād*) of Saul.

**24:16-20** Saul seemed to respond with genuine emotions and repentance and declared David to be more righteous than he was. Saul recognized that Yahweh had delivered him into David's "hands" (*yād*), but David had not killed him. Saul acknowledged that David was the true

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<sup>79</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 265.

anointed king and that the kingdom would be established in David's "hands" (*yād*). This was Saul's first confession that David would become king.

**24:21-22** Saul then asked David to swear to him that he would not wipe out all of his descendants when he became king. Like David's covenant with Jonathan, David also made a covenant with Saul, promising him that he would not harm his family when he became king. With both Jonathan and Saul, David had promised to function in a way that was completely unlike the kings of the other nations when he became king.

**25:1a** Samuel has not been mentioned since 1 Sam. 19:22, so the mention of his death here is intentional. The narrator mentions the death of Samuel only after Saul confessed that David would become king (1 Sam. 24:21). Samuel's death made David's situation more problematic since Samuel was clearly opposed to Saul. This account also demonstrates that David continued to experience Yahweh's favor without Samuel.<sup>80</sup>

**25:1b-3** Now that Saul was no longer pursuing David, David moved his men to Carmel (1 Sam. 15:12) and settled down for a while. The narrator mentions Nabal's wealth before his name. Nabal means "fool" (Isa. 32:5-6) or "wineskin" (1 Sam. 25:18) or refers to one marked by wine (1 Sam. 25:36). The root *nbl* can refer to something dropped, and its cognate noun *nebēlā* means "corpse," which is what Nabal would become.<sup>81</sup> Fools and wealth are considered a dangerous combination (Prov. 30:22). Nabal clearly stands in place of Saul, though care should be taken not to equate them directly.<sup>82</sup> Abigail's introduction begins with her character. The mention of Abigail's wisdom puts her briefly in the role of Samuel. But the mention of her beauty sets her up for trouble. In contrast, Nabal was harsh and evil. He was also a descendant of Caleb.

**25:4-9** When David heard that Nabal was shearing his sheep, meaning he was going to sell the wool for a profit, he sent his men to request provisions. David addressed Nabal as a kinsman, wished him peace, and presented the case that in all the time that David had been living next to Nabal his men had not harmed the sheep nor harmed or insulted his shepherds. David anticipated some mutual respect, and violence was not present at the beginning, although David was asking with a band of 600 men.

David was operating in accordance with the practices of his time. He and his men needed to stay alive, so they scavenged for food and provisions. David showed godliness by refusing to become a bandit who robbed and pillaged. Instead, he offered his protection, expecting to be rewarded. From his perspective, his actions were deserving of favor, and Nabal's response was deserving of death. He simply reflected the code of the day.<sup>83</sup>

**25:10-11** Nabal answered by questioning who David was. Nabal was not saying he did not know who David was because he obviously knew that he was the son of Jesse. Nabal was stating that he did not recognize David as a legitimate authority, especially since David was rebelling against his master Saul. Nabal said he would not give David anything of his that he had worked so hard to have. Nabal was greedy and a fool, for he did not recognize the authority of Yahweh's anointed king and was unwilling to show hospitality to a person in need.

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<sup>80</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 265.

<sup>81</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 270.

<sup>82</sup> See M. E. Biddle. "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertekstualiteit in Characterization," p. 626.

<sup>83</sup> See Robert. B. Chisholm. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 165.

**25:12-13** David's response was to take 400 men in order to kill Nabal and all the men who belonged to him (1 Sam. 25:22, 32-34). This response was an extreme overreaction to Nabal's offense. Not only was David willing to kill Nabal for his lack of generosity, which is a violation of the Law, but he was also willing to kill all the innocents connected to Nabal, which is a violation of the Law and how the Canaanites acted. David was acting just like Saul, who killed all the priests of Nob, and like a mercenary who extorts others for money. This is a violation of Deut. 17:14-20, where the king was not allowed to pursue money as security.

**25:14-17** One of the servants reported to Abigail that David was coming with armed men. The servant's defense of David suggests that maybe this was not his original intention when he asked for supplies. However, through his wounded pride, his actions were wrong.

**25:18-20** Abigail immediately responded by gathering a large amount of supplies so she could intercept David on the road and give him what he asked for in order to stay his wrath. Her amounts were so large that she probably used the resources that had already been prepared for the feast.

**25:21-22** The narrator reveals David's emotions and motivations for his actions. David was angry that he had voluntarily guarded Nabal's flocks and had been offered nothing. Though Nabal's actions were wrong, David, as Yahweh's anointed, should have been willing to serve his people without anything in return. Yet here he announced that he was going to kill every male that belonged to Nabal for one man's offense. The word "male" in the English literally reads in the Hebrew "as one who pissed against the wall." David's language was intentionally crude. The idiom is always used in the context of group extermination (1 Sam. 25:34; 1 Kgs. 14:10; 16:11; 21:21; 2 Kgs. 9:8), the vulgarity demeaning those to be killed.

**25:23-31** Abigail threw herself on the ground before David in humble submission. She stated that she was willing to take on herself all the guilt of Nabal who was a fool and "a man of Belial." In Abigail's speech here, she called herself David's "maidservant" ( 'āmā) and "servant" (siphā). The first (1 Sam. 25:24, 25, 28, 31, 41) reflects her subordinate position but that David had an obligation to take care of her. By contrast, the second is used twice (1 Sam. 25:27, 41) to refer to a gift and willingness to serve in a possible servile position.<sup>84</sup> Abigail's humility, self-sacrifice, and rational thought stands in contrast to David's pride and emotionalism.

Abigail gave praise to Yahweh for stopping David from bloodshed on this day. The irony is that David had not yet changed his mind about killing everyone, but Yahweh was using Abigail in this moment to stop him and change his mind. Abigail recognized Yahweh's hand using her. Abigail's language echoes the man of God (1 Sam. 2:35) while anticipating Nathan's prophecy (2 Sam. 7:16).

Abigail acknowledged that Yahweh had chosen David to be king and that Yahweh would keep His promise in establishing David's kingdom. David did not have to resort to bloodshed to get the kingdom, for Yahweh would bring about His will for David. David must not exact vengeance; that is for Yahweh alone (Prov. 25:21-22; Rom. 12:14-21). Abigail said that David had nothing to fear, whether violence or lack of food because Yahweh would protect and take care of him. Abigail then finished by stating that it would be a great day when David could sit on the throne with a clear conscience that he did not have innocent blood on his hands and feel overwhelmed with guilt.

<sup>84</sup> See Robert B. Chisholm. *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew*, p. 42.

**25:32-35** David immediately recognized the working of Yahweh through Abigail, in contrast to Saul, who did not recognize when Yahweh used his soldiers to try to stop him from killing the priests. Both Saul and David were willing to kill all the males connected to the person they perceived had offended them. But what made David a man after Yahweh's heart was that he saw Yahweh at work in his life, repented when confronted about his sin, and humbled himself in submission to the kingship and will of Yahweh.

**25:36-38** Meanwhile, Nabal was drunk and acting like he was a king, oblivious to the fact that he was about ready to die and that Abigail had saved him. The next morning when he found out what had happened, his heart failed him, and ten days later Yahweh killed him for his sins. Yahweh had fought David's battle for him and exacted justice on Nabal. All David had to do was trust Yahweh and wait for Him to work. This was a lesson in trusting and waiting on Yahweh to remove Saul and give David the kingdom.

**25:39-42** David praised Yahweh for dealing with Nabal, but after the time of mourning for the dead (about a week), David immediately sent word to Abigail to come to him so that he could take her as his wife. This was a violation of Deut. 17:14-20, where David was collecting wives to secure his throne. Abigail submitted to David and became his wife.

**25:43-44** The narrator then mentions the other wives of David. Abigail provided David with access to the Calebite clan centered in Hebron, where David would first become king over Judah (2 Sam. 2:1-4). Ahinoam provided David with important ties to the rest of Judah. However, Michal's removal from David separated him from the northern tribes. Yet even though Michal had been given to another, David still considered her to be his wife as he would later demand her back (2 Sam. 3:13-16). David now knew that he could not claim the throne by violence, but he thought he could through political marriages.

**26:1-5** Once again the Ziphites betrayed David to Saul (1 Sam. 23:19). David had obviously moved slightly by the time Saul arrived, but David was farther out into the wilderness. So, after a time of not pursuing David, Saul went out to find David once again to kill him. This time David sent scouts to find out where Saul was.

**26:6-12** Unlike the previous time, David sought Saul and went into his camp. Abishai, Joab's brother, went with David into Saul's camp. Joab will not be introduced until 2 Sam. 2:23. Joab, Abishai, and Asahel were sons of Zeruiah, who was David's sister, making them David's nephews (1 Chr. 2:16).

David and Abishai were able to walk right up to Saul and Abner, Saul's general, while they were sleeping. Probably knowing from the previous incident that David would not kill Saul, Abishai asked whether he may kill Saul while he slept, for it was obvious that Yahweh had given him into David's hands.

This time David did not agree only to be convicted and stop himself; instead, he immediately said no because it would wrong to kill Yahweh's anointed and that Yahweh would remove Saul in His own time. David knew that he would not be free of guilt if he ordered someone else to kill Saul. David had learned from the previous time and especially with his encounter with Abigail to trust and wait on Yahweh to give him the kingdom in His own time and way. David had a better understanding here of what Yahweh was doing with allowing Saul to pursue him. Yahweh was teaching David to rely on Him. So, David took Saul's spear and water jug and left the camp.

**26:13-20** David stood on a hill at a safe distance and called to Abner and accused him of failing to protect Saul. Once again David asked what he had done wrong to justify Saul's pursuit and desire to kill him. If Yahweh had incited Saul against him, then David asked that he may be able to make a sacrifice to Yahweh to atone for his sin. But if people had incited Saul against him, then David cursed them. David made it clear that he did not want to leave the land because he did not want to die outside the land.

**26:21** Previously, Saul had acknowledged that David was more righteous than he was (1 Sam. 24:18), but this time he confessed his own sin. Saul confessed that he had acted like a fool, like Nabal, and that he would go home and stop pursuing David.

**26:22-24** David's central point is developed here when he draws on the principle that Yahweh rewards people for their righteous behavior, before stating that he had acted righteously with Saul by not killing him. David could not kill Saul because Saul was Yahweh's anointed. David believed that because he protected Saul's life, Yahweh would protect his. David could not claim the throne by violence, but Saul could not successively attack David. Yahweh's purpose for both men meant that David must live with this tension.

**26:25** Saul responded by blessing David but never mentioned Yahweh. David and Saul would never see each other again.

### **E. David in Philistia and the End of Saul's Reign (27:1-31:13)**

Whereas previously the narrative alternated between David and Saul, and David was the primary focus, now Saul becomes more prominent as the narrative moves toward his death. Saul's seeking out the medium of Endor becomes the final indisputable evidence that he was completely opposed to and outside the will of Yahweh. This also justifies his death as one who pursued the occult rather than Yahweh.

At the same time, 1 Sam. 27 functions to create the problem for David that he was aligned with Philistines when they were about to go to war against Israel. David was also not trusting in Yahweh and, in his desperation, put himself in the position of becoming an opposition to Yahweh's kingdom and people. David's lack of trust in Yahweh during this time is seen in the fact that Yahweh is not mentioned at all in 1 Sam. 27:1–28:2 and is not mentioned until 1 Sam. 30. The question is, when Saul dies and leaves a power vacuum in Israel, will David be in the right place, dependent upon Yahweh again, and geographically in Israelite territory, ready to take the throne and lead Yahweh's people?

1 Sam. 27 – 2 Sam. 1 is a new section that employs serial narration, where each episode requires and builds on the episodes that precede it. These chapters tell a fluid story of the end of Saul's reign over Israel.

**27:1-4** David, tired of fleeing from Saul, decided that living in Philistine territory among his enemy was better than dealing with Saul. Though it is understandable to want to leave Israelite territory, he was still leaving his land and the people, and this would cost him when Saul died and he became king. As the anointed king, he had a duty to be with his people. The irony here is that he had just told Saul that he did not want to die outside the land (1 Sam. 26:20), and this was now a possibility. (Though the Philistine territory technically belonged to Israel, the fact that it was controlled by the Philistines means that it was outside the land.) David had lost sight of his special relationship with Yahweh and was not trusting Him. David took his men and their families to Gath in Philistine territory, and Saul stopped pursuing him.

**27:5-7** David asked Achish, the king of Gath, if he could live in one of the Philistine cities. David's goal was to find a base where he was protected by Achish but sufficiently remote that he could run his own affairs. Achish gave David the city of Ziklag, where he lived for a year and four months. Ziklag was in the northern Negev and initially listed as belonging to Simeon (Josh. 15:31; 19:3). Thus, it was a town where the Philistines were not heavily involved, allowing David to do his own thing, which would be advantageous to Achish to strengthen his control by placing troops there.

Whereas previously David had begun to approach Achish for protection but became fearful and backed out (1 Sam. 21:10-15), now enough years have passed to clearly demonstrate to Achish that David was not aligned with Saul and that David had his own army to strengthen him. Achish was probably willing to aid David knowing that he would be king one day and would be an ally with Achish. Achish likely realized by this point that David was a much more formidable force than Saul and so it would be advantageous to become allies.

**27:8-9** David attacked all the enemies of Israel in the southern Negev region. The Geshurites were inhabitants of the Negev in the South of Judah (Josh. 13:1-2). The Girzites are unknown. The Amalekites lived in the Negev region and were the ones who attacked Israel after the exodus (Ex. 17:8-15) and whom Saul was commanded by Yahweh to kill (1 Sam. 15:1-11). David was

doing what Saul was supposed to have done. Yet these people groups were allies with the Philistines, so David left none alive so that they could not report to Achish.

**27:10-12** David had to report to Achish after his raids, no doubt so Achish could claim his share. Thus, David needed to explain where the livestock were coming from. Though David was raiding the wilderness toward Egypt, Achish would have expected him to raid Judah, so this was what David told. Him. Achish believed that David was against Israel because of Saul and so trusted him more and more.

**28:1-2** Achish had now enlisted David into his army to fight against Saul and the Israelites. Achish's complete trust of David now caused David his greatest difficulty. David seemed bound by his promises to serve the Philistines, even though this meant fighting against Israel. But David could not fight against the chosen people of Yahweh or Saul, who he had sworn he would not kill (1 Sam. 24:5-6; 26:9-11). David was seemingly caught in his own cleverness. Being Achish's bodyguard was an important position, though one in which it would be extremely difficult for David to act against Achish and survive.<sup>85</sup>

**28:3** The narrator puts on hold the tension of David in the Philistine army about to go into battle in order to tell of Saul's final judgment from Yahweh. Now the narrator sets up the following events with the fact that Samuel the prophet was dead and that Saul had expelled the mediums—the forbidden means of communication with the spirits—from the land. And earlier the narrator had revealed that Abiathar had taken the ephod, the means of communicating with Yahweh, to David (1 Sam. 23:6). The point is that Saul had no way of seeking Yahweh except repentance.

**28:4-6** The Philistines had pressed well into Israel's north, with Shumen lying in the Jezreel Valley, about 15 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Saul began to panic in the face of such a large Philistine force. But Saul did not know where to turn for guidance since Yahweh was not answering him because of his sin and since the other previously mentioned means were not available. Saul (*sha'al*) "inquired" (*sha'al*) of Yahweh, but there was no answer. The unstated irony is that Saul's actions against the priests of Nob (1 Sam. 22:18-19) robbed him of access to the ephod as a means of guidance from Yahweh.<sup>86</sup>

**28:7-10** So Saul (*sha'al*) decided to inquire (*sha'al*) of the medium of Endor. Endor was about 12 miles north of Saul's camp. In order to not be recognized, Saul disguised himself. Whenever kings disguise themselves in the books of Samuel and Kings, the result is their condemnation. Occult activities were prohibited by the Law (Lev. 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:11; Isa. 8:19-20), and Saul was going to do the very thing that Samuel had compared his disobedience to when he was rejected as king (1 Sam. 15:23).

The woman was hesitant to conjure the spirit for Saul because Saul had made it illegal, according to the Law, to be a medium. And with great irony Saul swore in the name of Yahweh that she would not be punished for the very thing that Yahweh had forbidden, that was punishable by death, and that he was supposed to enforce as Yahweh's anointed king.

**28:11-14** Saul requested that Samuel be conjured for him to talk to. When the woman called for Samuel and saw the spirit of Samuel, she realized that she was in trouble and panicked. The woman first described what she saw as "a ghostly figure" (NIV), "divine being/spirit" (NET, NASB), or "god" (ESV). The Hebrew word here is *'elōhîm* ("gods") in plural form, which is

<sup>85</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 286.

<sup>86</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 291.

determined by its modifying participle (“coming up”). The word *’elōhîm* can also refer to spirits or any being that is not a part of the material realm. The fact that *’elōhîm* is plural here suggests that underworld spirits (plural) are what appeared. But in the following verse, Saul understood the plural word to refer to a singular being. The reference is to the spirit of Samuel. When the medium described the spirit as an old man wrapped in a “robe” (*me ’îl*), Saul immediately knew that it was Samuel (1 Sam. 15:27-29).

According to the Bible, Samuel really did appear before the medium. First, she was scared when she saw Samuel. Mediums usually have a familiar spirit they conjure and talk to. The fact that she was scared means she did not expect it to work or expected something else more familiar to appear. Second, Samuel’s message is one of judgment for calling him forth and for disobeying Yahweh. Spirits that mediums call forth are not known for condemning people for using mediums and for disobeying Yahweh. It is clear that the woman did not actually call Samuel forth but that Yahweh allowed it in order to condemn Saul one last time through His prophet.

**28:15-19** Samuel immediately rebuked Saul with a question for disturbing the dead, which was forbidden by Yahweh (1 Sam. 13:11-12). Saul explained that he was in distress because Yahweh was not answering him. But he had chosen to use forbidden practices to consult Yahweh’s prophet. Saul could no longer receive divine guidance, for he had rejected earlier guidance.

The judgment is initially framed as a question that plays on Saul’s name and the verb “to ask” (*sha’al*). Saul had made Yahweh his enemy through his constant rebellion. Because of his previous rebellion and now this, tomorrow he and his sons would die in the battle because Yahweh was going to give him and Israel over to the Philistines. In Saul’s desperation to receive guidance for the battle, his own solution was what finally defeated him. He was called to deliver Israel from the Philistines (1 Sam. 9:16), but instead he delivered Israel over to the Philistines.

**28:20-25** Saul immediately fell face down, like the statue of Dagon (1 Sam. 5:1-5), in defeat because of the judgment of Yahweh and because of hunger. There is an irony in a king who was a head taller than the rest (1 Sam. 9:2) and was now face on the ground.<sup>87</sup>

The woman offered to feed Saul, but he refused. With the urging of his men, he agreed. The value of the woman’s gift of the meal was itself probably intended to place an obligation on Saul. Saul initially refused the medium’s offer, perhaps because of the implication of accepting her authority. The irony is that where Saul previously could not wait on Samuel to make a sacrifice before Yahweh, he was now waiting for the medium to slaughter an animal and eat with her in fellowship.

**29:1** 1 Sam. 28:4 began with the Philistines gathering their forces at Aphek in the north. The fact that the Philistines gathering at Aphek is mentioned again in 1 Sam. 29:1 and 1 Sam. 11 means the events of 1 Sam. 29 are out of chronological order and happened before Saul’s encounter with the medium of Endor in 1 Sam. 28:3-25. Now that it is clear that Saul would die in this battle. The question is, would David kill Saul in battle since he was fighting with the Philistines? And would David be able to take the throne after Saul’s death if he was in Philistine territory?

**29:2-3** As the Philistine army was marching up to Aphek, commanders in the army showed their distrust of David and his men being with them when they asked, “What about these Hebrews?”

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<sup>87</sup> See Ralph W. Klein. *1 Samuel*, p. 272.

The word *Hebrew* is only used by foreigners when they refer to the Israelites in a demeaning way, or sometimes the Israelites use it of themselves when talking to foreigners.

Achish defended David by pointing out that he had defected from Saul and that he had been loyal to him for the past year. But the fact that David had defected perhaps suggested he was more an opportunist than a loyalist, so the features Achish so greatly valued might also be what made David a threat to the Philistines.

**29:4-5** Where the Philistine commander's first question was open ended, this time it is stated that they would gather against Achish if David was not removed from the battle, and he insisted that David be directed to return to Ziklag. They might have tolerated David previously, but now they were going up against David's own people, and they did not trust him to not turn on them.

**29:6-11** Achish then turned to David and told him he had to leave because of the insistence of his commanders. From Achish's point of view, he was reporting a misunderstanding of David on the part of his commanders. In reality, the Philistine lords had understood more about David than Achish had. Remarkably, Achish's praise of David's character was done with an oath sworn in the name of Yahweh. Even more notable, this is the only reference to Yahweh during David's time among the Philistines, and it came from Achish, not David.

David protested in order to remain in the battle. David's response was a series of questions directed towards his relationship with Achish, not to the argument of Philistine commanders. This let him protest the decision without actually contesting the validity of its grounds. When David asked why he could not fight for his lord, he did not indicate which lord he meant.<sup>88</sup>

So, David returned to Ziklag, and the Philistine army went to Aphek in order to defeat Saul and the Israelites as declared by Yahweh (1 Sam. 28:19). Yahweh used the rejection of Achish's commanders in order to remove David from the battle, first to return David to the Negev, well away from the battle, so he would not be involved in Saul's death. Only then is Saul's death recounted. And second, this would ultimately return David to Israelite territory to take the throne that Saul was about to vacate.

**30:1-6** The return to Ziklag from Aphek was a three-day journey. This made it impossible for David to be at Gilboa. It was about 50 miles from Aphek to Ziklag. David discovered that while they were gone, the Amalekites had burned down their homes and taken their wives and children as captives. The Amalekites did not kill any of them, for they probably hoped to sell their captives as slaves.

When David and his men discovered this, David's men blamed him and turned on him, threatening to kill him. But David found comfort in Yahweh. This is the first time that Yahweh is mentioned in connection to David since he has been in Philistine territory. Perhaps he was beginning to see Yahweh's hand at work in Achish removing him from the Philistine army.

**30:7-10** David immediately inquired of Yahweh through the ephod to discern whether he should pursue the Amalekites and whether he would be able to defeat them. In contrast to Saul's requests, Yahweh responded and promised David success. David headed out west or southwest for between 15 to 25 miles toward the Wadi Besor. There, two hundred of his six hundred men were too tired to continue on.

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<sup>88</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 300.

**30:11-15** David found an Egyptian who had escaped the Amalekites and fed him. The meal's details show that David was faithful to the requirements concerning foreigners (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 23:7).<sup>89</sup> There might also be a contrast to Saul's meal with a medium, which was forbidden by Yahweh (1 Sam. 28:24-25), and David feeding a foreigner, which was required by Yahweh. The Egyptian promised to lead David to the Amalekites if David did not kill him or hand him over.

**30:16-20** Just as Yahweh had promised, David was victorious over the Amalekites, and he recovered all the wives, children, and possessions that the Amalekites had taken. It is not common in the ancient world for a village to be attacked and for so many people to be taken but no one harmed; not only this, but all the people, animals, and plunder were recovered as well. Why did Yahweh allow this to happen? Part of it was to remind David of Yahweh's ability to protect him and deliver him from his enemies. Perhaps Yahweh allowed David's Philistine home to be burned down and all of the people to be unharmed just days before Saul was to die in order to get David to return to Israelite territory to take the throne. David was not where he was supposed to be, and he needed to be in Israelite territory at this crucial moment.

**30:21-31** Despite the protesting of some of his men, David allowed the two hundred men who did not fight with them to share in the plunder. Not only that, David shared the plunder with all those in Judah in whose territory he had hid over the years. This was partly a thanks offering as well as a gift to garner support for when he became king. David stated that his plunder was from Yahweh's enemies. This represents a fundamental shift in David's approach since he arrived in Philistine territory.

**31:1-6** Just as Yahweh had said, the Israelites were defeated; Saul's sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malki-Shua were killed; and Saul was fatally wounded with arrows. Saul commanded his armor-bearer to kill him so that the Philistines would not capture and torture him. His armor-bearer refused, so Saul ran himself through with his own sword. This entire time, Saul feared that David would kill him and take the throne. In the end, he killed himself, giving up the throne to David. This event echoes the deaths of Eli and his sons, all of which also happened on a single day (1 Sam. 4:10-18).

**31:7** The Philistines controlled large areas of Israel's north, especially the trade routes through the Jezreel Valley. The mention of the territory on the east side of the Jordan River cannot mean they occupied too much there, since the men of Jabesh Gilead were unaffected and Ish-Bosheth's kingdom began in the Transjordan. But the mention of their presence in the Transjordan suggests they occupied enough to control the trade route from the north of Israel through to the cities on the coastal plain. With Saul's death, Israel lost both its government and one of its principal areas of revenue.<sup>90</sup>

**31:8-10** The next day, the Philistines found the bodies of Saul and his sons and put their armor in the temple of the Ashtoreths, cut off their heads, hung their heads in the Dagon temple (1 Chr. 10:10), and hung their bodies on the city wall of Beth Shan. Beth Shan was about 5 miles east of Gilboa. Much like the beginning of Samuel (1 Sam. 4), the Philistines have had a great victory over Israel and taken the symbol of their power from them—the Ark of the Covenant in the beginning and now their king. And they celebrated this victory in the temple of their gods. But

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<sup>89</sup> See R. D. Bergen. *1, 2 Samuel*, p. 277.

<sup>90</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 314.

whereas in the beginning of Samuel Yahweh removed the head of their god Dagon (1 Sam. 5:1-5) and David removed Goliath's head (1 Sam. 17:51), now they removed the head of Saul. Thus, Saul had accomplished nothing for Israel in all the years of his reign and even undid what Samuel had accomplished (1 Sam. 7), even though Israel believed that he would defeat their enemies (1 Sam. 8:4-5, 19-20).

**31:11-13** When the men of Jabesh Gilead heard what had happened, they snuck over to Beth Shan and took the bodies of Saul and his sons, burned them, and buried the bones. Jabesh Gilead was about 12 miles southeast of Beth Shan. The reason the men of Jabesh Gilead did this for Saul was that some of his relatives were from there (Judg. 21:10-14) and that they were the city Saul rescued from Nahash at the very beginning of his reign (1 Sam. 11:1-11).

Fasting to signify mourning was normal (Judg. 20:26; 1 Kgs. 21:27; Zech. 7:5). But burning the bodies was unusual because Israelites did not normally practice cremation, and Amos condemned some of the Moabites who burned to lime the bones of an Edomite king (Amos 2:1-3). The Chronicler apparently felt some discomfort with it, omitting the burning (1 Chr. 10:12). It could have been a local practice, intended to honor Saul and his sons at Jabesh Gilead. A seven-day period of uncleanness typically followed contact with a corpse (Num. 19:11), and this may explain the length of the fast. If the burning was disgraceful, then even the final attempt to honor Saul might offer less than intended. It could be a final and somewhat ironic observation on his reign. The intentions were right, but the ritual act never quite worked out as it should have.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 315.

## IV. David's Reign and Triumphs (2 Samuel 1:1-9:13)

This division begins the reign of David and the way Yahweh used David's kingship to bless and expand the kingdom of Israel in fulfillment to His promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18-21). Through his faithfulness to Yahweh David consolidated the power of Israel in Jerusalem and expanded the territory of Israel from the southern Negev all the way up to the Euphrates River. The focus here is that David worshiped Yahweh in all that he did by submitting to the sovereignty of Yahweh.

2 Sam. 1 is the end of the serial narration of 1 Sam. 27 – 2 Sam. 1. It brings an end to the reign of Saul, with David hearing the news and mourning the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. 2 Sam. 2-9 is episodic narration, where each episode is complete in itself and depends upon the completion of the previous episode. These chapters tell of isolated events of David becoming king over Israel.

### A. The Unification of David's Kingdom (1:1-4:12)

This section deals with David's conflict with Ish-Bosheth and Abner who seized the throne of Israel against the will of Yahweh. Yet despite that, David dealt with both of them in a just way as he ascended to the throne of Judah and then Israel.

**1:1-10** David was still living in Ziklag, which means he still had not returned to Israelite territory. After three days, a man from the Israelite camp came to David and reported the deaths of Saul and his sons. David asked for proof of how the man knew. The man said he was an Amalekite who was asked by Saul to kill him since he was dying, so he claimed to have killed Saul, yet he was silent about Jonathan's death. It is obvious to the reader that the man was lying since this was not how the narrator recorded the death of Saul (1 Sam. 31:1-6). Most likely, the man had come across Saul's dead body when he was scavenging for valuables among the dead. Seeing the crown and arm bands of the king, he decided to take them to David with a story of killing Saul, the enemy of David, to receive honor and a reward for killing David's enemy. This shows that David had not taken the crown and arm bands by force.

**1:11-16** Then David and all his men mourned the deaths of Saul and Jonathan and the defeat of the Israelite army. When David asked where the man was from, he was not asking for his ethnicity; rather he needed to know whether he was subject to Israelite law. As a resident foreigner, he was subject to Israelite law.<sup>92</sup> David had the man killed and declared that the man with his own mouth had testified to his guilt of killing Yahweh's anointed. In 1 Sam. 24:7 and 1 Sam. 26:9-11, David used similar language to indicate why neither he nor Abishai should kill Saul. If David was unwilling to kill Yahweh's anointed, then how much more would he not tolerate someone else killing Saul? The crime was not simply murder (Ex. 20:13) but, more specifically, the killing of Yahweh's anointed. David believed that only Yahweh could end Saul's life (1 Sam. 26:10), so any human action against him was a rebellion against Yahweh.

**1:17-20** David then wrote a lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. The first word (*sebî*) in the lament can mean "beauty" or "gazelle," and there may be an intentional play on these homonyms, given their later references to Saul and Jonathan's speed (2 Sam. 1:23). The plural of the word also occurs in Song of Songs as a play on the name "Yahweh of hosts" (Song of Songs

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<sup>92</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 323.

2:7, 9, 17; 3:5).<sup>93</sup> David urges that the deaths of Saul and Jonathan not be known in Philistia lest they celebrate while Israel mourns.

**1:21** David then asked that Mount Gilboa be barren since that was where Saul and Jonathan died. The point is that Mount Gilboa would for David forever have a tragic memory connected to it. In ancient Near Eastern practice, a warrior's shield would have to be anointed regularly in order to ensure that the leather did not become dry and brittle. But now that Saul was dead, the once-cared-for shield of the mighty warrior lay sadly discarded. Just as Saul, the anointed one of Yahweh, was gone, so was his shield of protection over Israel.

**1:22-27** David then celebrated the mighty achievements of Saul and Jonathan as warriors who were loved by the people. David especially grieved the loss of Jonathan, with whom he was so close. The poem gradually moves its focus from Saul to Jonathan. There are repeated references to the high places (2 Sam. 1:19a, 25c). While Saul and Jonathan together are beloved and pleasant (2 Sam. 1:23a), there are repeated references to Jonathan individually (2 Sam. 1:26b, c). Both the "daughters of the Philistines" (2 Sam. 1:23c) and the "daughters of Israel" (2 Sam. 1:24a) are mentioned, the two forming a contrast between those who should not exult and those who should mourn. These repetitions bind the poem together, while reference to the Philistine women as daughters of the uncircumcised links it to Saul's reference to the Philistines in 1 Sam. 31:4.<sup>94</sup>

"The poem's placement here provides both the Accession Narrative's climax and also a theological reflection that closes off the whole of Samuel so far. Structurally, Samuel is built around three major poetic blocks: Hannah's Song (1 Sam. 2:1-10), David's lament (2 Sam. 1:17-27) and David's two reflective pieces (2 Sam. 22:1 - 23:7). Kingship is central in each poem. Hannah's Song anticipates kingship. In David's lament, Saul's failure to provide the kingship required is considered, while the reflective pieces consider how kingship can make a positive contribution. Hannah's Song and the reflective pieces are at the book's boundaries, and the lament is its turning point as we move from Saul to David. The lament refuses to condemn Saul and Jonathan. Their memory is to be honoured. At the same time, it prepares for David's arrival as king, even if that is incomplete until 5:5."<sup>95</sup>

**2:1-4a** No attempt is made to indicate how long David remained at Ziklag. David finally inquired of Yahweh whether he should go back to Israelite territory, and of course Yahweh's answer was yes. Yahweh told David to go to Hebron, which was about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem in the tribal territory of Judah. When David arrived in Hebron with all his men and their families, the people anointed David as the king over the tribe of Judah. David was not yet made the king over all of Israel.

**2:4b-7** When David heard of how Jabesh-Gilead had buried Saul and Jonathan, he promised to take care of them in the same way they had taken care of Saul and Jonathan. David's interacting with the north was a way that recognized their contribution while also enhancing his position. David carefully phrased his language with references to the loyalty (*hesed*) of the Jabesh Gileadites and references to Saul as their lord (*ādōn*). In the midst of this he introduced reference

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<sup>93</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 324.

<sup>94</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 320-321.

<sup>95</sup> David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 321

to Yahweh to emphasize the bonds that united all the tribes. They were invited to align themselves with David and Judah, but David did not compel their loyalty.

**2:8-11** Meanwhile, Abner, the commander of Saul's army, established Ish-Bosheth, Saul's son, as king in the north of Israel. Everything occurred at Abner's initiative. He established the throne in the city of Mahanaim that was in the Transjordan, south of the Jabbok. There was no anointing, public recognition, or evidence of Yahweh's involvement in the kingship of Ish-Bosheth. Real power remained with Abner since all the verbs refer to his actions. The key point for Abner was that it was away from both David, who controlled the south, and the Philistines, who controlled the west central part of Israel. Ish-Bosheth would reign the north for two years and David the south for seven years.

**2:12-13** How the conflict developed between the houses of Saul and David does not interest the narrator. Abner with the men of Ish-Bosheth met Joab with the men of David at Gibeon in order to sue for peace. Gibeon was about six miles northwest of Jerusalem and was an important territorial claim since Gibeon lay more or less on the country's north-south divide, perhaps near the border between them. It cannot be assumed the city was favorably disposed toward the house of Saul since 1 Sam. 21:1-14 indicates considerable animosity.

**2:14-16** Abner and Joab agreed to settle their conflict through a hand-to-hand fight among twelve of their best men from each side. But when the men fought, all men from both sides killed each other simultaneously, meaning there was no victor.

**2:17-23** Thus the two sides fought each other in an intense battle in which David's men began to overcome Abner's men. Overcome by David's forces, Abner ran away from the conflict and Asahel, the brother of Joab, to chase him down. Asahel was very fast and eventually caught up with Abner. Abner tried to call Asahel off and bribe him to give up the chase. Abner was conscious of the need to avoid creating an additional feud with Joab. Joab was clearly known as someone not to be crossed, something that becomes clear in later narratives.

Asahel refused to give up, so Abner killed Asahel by thrusting the end of his spear back into Asahel's stomach as he caught up with him. Abner averted pursuit but gained a blood feud he dreaded.

**2:24-32** Joab and Abishai, seeing the death of their brother, pursued Abner. By the time they caught up with Abner, he had made it to the Benjaminite army, who rallied behind him. Abner used the same technique as David in 1 Sam. 26:13-16, standing on a hill and calling to his adversary, Abner. Abner called out for a truce since so many Israelites were dying in a civil war of brothers.

Joab counted his men and found that only nineteen had died, in contrast to the 360 of Abner's men who had died. Abner returned to Mahanaim and Joab to Hebron.

**3:1** Despite this temporary truce, the war between the two houses continued, and David grew stronger and stronger over Ish-Bosheth's forces. As Yahweh's anointed, Yahweh blessed David with greater superiority over Ish-Bosheth, who was not anointed by Yahweh.

**3:2-5** In contrast, the narrator then lists the sons of David. The first was Amnon, born to Ahinoam, David's second wife after Michal (1 Sam. 25:43). Amnon would cause problems for the family in 2 Sam. 13. The second son was Kileab, born to Abigail the widow of Nabal (2 Sam. 25). Kileab is never mentioned again, so he must have died young. The third son was Absalom, born to Maacah who was from the royal family in Geshur, immediately to the north of Ish-

bosheth in Mahanaim. Absalom would cause problems for the family in 2 Sam. 13-19. The fourth son was Adonijah, born to Haggith. Adonijah would cause problems for the family in 1 Kgs. 1-2. The fifth son was Shephatiah, the son of Abital, who is never mentioned again. And the sixth son was Ithream, the son of David's wife Eglah, who is never mentioned again. Curiously, only Eglah is called David's wife. All these wives show that David was continuing to violate the regulations of the Deuteronomic king (Deut. 17:14-20). David's growing harem shows that he was becoming enamored with the privileges of kinship and was modeling his kingship after the culture around him.

**3:6-11** Abner began to strengthen his power in the house of Ish-Bosheth. As a result, Ish-Bosheth accused Abner of sleeping with Saul's concubine Rizpah. This crime would not have been merely an ethical violation but was also politically significant since it would have been understood as a blatant declaration of aspirations to kingship. Abner responded with great anger against Ish-Bosheth and made a clear and well-structured argument against the accusation. It is very unlikely that Abner did what he was accused of since he was the one who put Ish-Bosheth into power—why would he then try to take the throne? In making Ish-Bosheth king, Abner risked everything because of his loyalty to Saul's family, including going against Yahweh, who had chosen David to be king. This is significant since even Abner, the commander of Saul's army, acknowledged David's anointing as king.

Likewise, if Abner was guilty, he would have just taken the kingship from Ish-Bosheth by force since he controlled the army. The fact that he abandoned Ish-Bosheth and took the army to David, losing everything he fought for in the process, shows that he was innocent of the accusation and truly offended by it after everything he had done for Ish-Bosheth. Most likely Ish-Bosheth falsely accused Abner because he feared Abner's growing power. But because he did not expect Abner's response and could not stop Abner because the army was under his control, he backed down in cowardly fear.

**3:12-16** Abner let David know that he was willing to give the army to David and turn the hearts of the people in the north toward David. David agreed under the condition that Michal, Saul's daughter, be given back to him. On the surface, it seems that David had a legitimate right to Michal since he never divorced her, and Saul had wrongly given her to another. However, David never tried to get her until this moment when he was about ready to become king over all of Israel. This reunion would strengthen his connection to the Benjaminites, having the descendant of Saul as his wife. David was unconcerned with the fact that she had a husband who clearly loved her.

Ish-Bosheth agreed to David's demand and took Michal from her husband. If Ish-Bosheth denied David's demand, it would trigger more open warfare, while accepting it would see more of his support ebb away. But Ish-Bosheth no longer had an army, so he was left with the second option. The fact that the narrator mentions the weeping of the husband here and Abner coldly telling him to go home shows that no one was concerned with the people this affected, that it was all merely politics.

**3:17-18** That Ish-bosheth had a very narrow power base is evident when Abner acknowledged that they previously wanted David to be king. Saul was supposed to deliver the nation from the Philistines (1 Sam. 9:16), but his role was transferred to David.

**3:19-21** The Benjaminites agreed to join David, and Abner willingly gave up command on the condition that David let him go and live in peace. David threw a banquet for Abner and agreed to

his request. The statement that David sent Abner away in peace is significant because of what follows and indicates that he was not involved in the following events.

**3:22-27** When Joab had returned from raiding, he was clearly informed that David had made a peace treaty with Abner and sent him away in peace. Joab claimed that Abner was merely spying out the land, which does not make sense since he had given up the army. But Joab was blinded by his desire for vengeance against Abner. Joab brought Abner back to the palace and pretended to have a conversation with him but then stabbed him in the stomach instead. Not only was this blatant murder during a time of peace, but it was also a violation of David's peace treaty with Abner that Joab would have also been under as the servant of David. Joab was intensely loyal to David's reign, but his loyalty always had its own agenda.

**3:28-30** David, being connected to Joab, the commander of David's army, needed to assert his innocence and introduce appropriate punishment for Joab before the Benjaminites.

Unfortunately, although David cursed Joab and publicly declared his actions as evil, he took no action against Joab. As king he had the right from Yahweh and the power to execute Joab for murder, yet David did not justly punish Joab's crime. Perhaps David decided he needed Joab too much, or perhaps he feared Joab's power (1 Sam. 3:38-39). Either way, this shows a flaw in David's character. David had showed he was willing to execute people for the crime of murder (1 Sam. 1:1-16; 4) and states later to Solomon that he should have killed Joab and then commanded Solomon to do so (1 Kgs. 2:5-6, 28-34). Though David had no problem dealing justly with people he was not close to in the kingdom (1 Sam. 1:1-16; 4), he did have a problem dealing justly with the people he was close with, like Joab. This will be seen later with how David handles his sons' rebellion. The narrator states clearly that Joab's actions were murder and vengeance.

**3:31-37** Here David is called king for the first time. David led the funeral procession for Abner and had him buried in Hebron. Then before everyone, including Joab, David sang a lament about how Abner had been innocently killed at the hands of the wicked. David then fasted during the funeral. When the people of Israel saw how David conducted himself, they were convinced that he was innocent and then approved of all he did and supported him as king.

**3:38-39** Whereas David's previous statements were public, these verses record the private comments of David. David knows that although kings rule, they do so only with their general's support; thus he could not attack Joab and Abishai outright. David knew the power that lay with the army commander. He had been prepared to work with Abner, and now he knew he must continue to work with Joab.

**4:1** With the death of Abner, Ish-Bosheth realized that he was completely on his own and became afraid. In the ancient Near East, the new king would kill all the descendants of the previous dynasty in order to secure his throne. The question is how David was going to deal with Ish-Bosheth.

**4:1-3** The narrator introduces Baanah and Rechab, the commanders of Ish-Bosheth's raiding parties. They were from Beeroth, which was a village a few miles southwest of Bethel in the territory of Benjamin. It is important to establish that Baanah and Rechab were Benjamites and, therefore, that David was not connected to their actions.

**4:4** The narrator then introduces Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan. When Saul and Jonathan died, Mephibosheth's nurse fled to safety with him but tripped and fell with him in her arms. The

fall crippled him in both legs. Once again, the question is how David would deal with Mephibosheth, especially in light of his treaty with Jonathan to not harm Jonathan's sons when he became king (1 Sam. 20:12-17).

**4:5-8** Baanah and Rechab went into the house of Ish-Bosheth while he was sleeping, and they stabbed him in the stomach and cut off his head. They betrayed their master and murdered a defenseless and innocent man. They then took the head of Ish-Bosheth to David, declaring their victory over David's enemy and hoping to be rewarded.

**4:9-11** David told them that if he had killed a man for killing Saul, then how much more would he kill men who killed an innocent man. David had the men killed and their bodies hung. He then buried the head of Ish-Bosheth. This incident shows that David did not tolerate injustice in his kingdom. But it also emphasizes his failure to exact justice upon Joab.



## B. The Establishment of David's Kingdom (5:1-9:13)

With David established as king, the narrative focuses on his work in his building the nation, establishing Israel's security and structure. Israelite kingship now began to achieve its goal. This section should probably be understood as describing several events from across the whole of David's reign and not events that closely followed one another. This section continues the episodic narrative of 2 Sam. 2-9.

The chiastic structure of this section shows that the main emphasis is on Israel's worship as the result of the victories Yahweh gave them.

**A** Military victories with Yahweh's help (5:17-25)

**B** Worship of Yahweh in bringing the Ark of the Covenant (6:1-23)

**B'** Worship of Yahweh in Nathan's oracle (7:1-29)

**A'** Military victories with Yahweh's help (8:1-14)

David's faithfulness in this section provides a grid through which the readers approach the darker tales in 2 Sam. 10-20. There, David's failures are manifest, but the overall assessment of his reign is positive because of his commitment to worshiping Yahweh. This provides the marker by which the book of Kings assesses all subsequent kings of Israel and Judah.<sup>96</sup>

**5:1-5** The tribes of Israel came to David and acknowledged that while Saul was king it was truly David who led them in victory against their enemies. They also acknowledged that Yahweh had anointed David as their ruler and shepherd. Previously the shepherd motif pointed to an actual keeping of flocks (1 Sam. 16:11; 17:15), but it now describes royal rule (2 Sam. 7:7). Although Samuel had announced the rights and duties of kingship (1 Sam. 10:25), it was only with David that a formal covenant was instituted (2 Sam. 3:21). Kingship is about mutual responsibilities, not just the exercise of power.

In separating the two kingdoms of Judah and all of Israel that David ruled over, the narrator emphasizes that David ruled over a united kingdom of tribes rather than a single nation.

**5:6-10** The Jebusite city of Jerusalem was a well-fortified city that was considered impossible to breach. It had never been fully captured (Judg. 1:8, 21) and remained a Jebusite city until David's time (Judg. 19:10-12).

The city of Jerusalem was a fortress that sat on a large hill called Zion. The Gihon spring was on the bottom part of the hill that Jerusalem sat on and flowed underground partway through the hill (today called Hezekiah's Tunnel). The Jebusites had built a shaft (today called Warren's Shaft) in the middle of the city that went down to this underground spring. This allowed them to get water while under siege since they did not have to go outside the city wall to the Gihon spring to get water. David sent his men through this underground spring and up through the shaft in order to enter the city and attack the Jebusites.

David captured the city of Jerusalem and named it the City of David. Jerusalem was an old and well-established city close to the Benjamin-Judah border and belonged to neither side of the Judah-Israel divide, making it a good central city of power to unite the north and south. The throne needed to be a national rallying point, and a neutral capital was an important tool in

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<sup>96</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 368.

achieving this. David became more powerful because Yahweh was with him (1 Sam. 16:13, 18; 17:37; 18:12, 14, 28; 20:13; 2 Sam. 5:10).

**5:11-12** The king of Tyre, north of Israel, allied with David and sent workers and supplies to aid in the building of David's palace. The narrator refrains from interpreting this in political or commercial terms. The focus is on how it affected David. It is said not only that Yahweh was with David (2 Sam. 5:10) but also that David could also see the evidence around him and knew that Yahweh was establishing his kingdom.

**5:13-16** However, David continued to acquire more concubines and have more children (eleven sons are listed, which is a violation of Deut. 17:17). Even though David saw that Yahweh was with him, he still sought alliances with other nations, through the marriages, in order to secure his borders and trade. This is the second time David's growing number of wives is mentioned (2 Sam. 3:2-5), and it also set a dangerous precedent for his son Solomon who would end up amassing 700 wives and 300 hundred concubines (1 Kgs. 11:1-6).

**5:17-21** When the Philistines heard that David had become king, they sought to kill him, for David's anointing was tantamount to rebellion against the Philistines, given their control of much of the country after Saul's death (1 Sam. 31:7). David immediately inquired of Yahweh whether he should attack the Philistines. Yahweh responded by guaranteeing that David would have victory. David defeated the Philistines and gave Yahweh glory for the defeat.

The epithet *Ba'al* (meaning “lord” or “master”) was used during this time for Yahweh and not the Phoenician deity later venerated by some in Israel. Unlike Saul, not only did David seek out Yahweh's will and guidance, but he obeyed and carried out Yahweh's command. The narrator states that David picked up the idols that the Philistines had left behind, and 1 Chr. 14:12 adds that David burned these idols.

**5:22-24** The second battle account is closely patterned on the first, so the differences introduced are significant. Again, the Philistines gathered against David, and again David inquired of Yahweh. The content of David's inquiry is not given but proceeds straight to Yahweh's reply. This foregrounds Yahweh as the one who gives victory and sets the tactics for the battle. Yahweh told David to circle around behind the Philistines and wait for His marching in the treetops. The sound of marching was most likely the angelic army of Yahweh (1 Sam. 1:3; 1 Kgs. 6:15-29; Ps. 103:19-20; 148:2). David obeyed, defeated the Philistines, and pursued them from Geba to Gezer, about 20 miles west of Jerusalem. David drove the Philistines from the Israelite territory they had occupied since 1 Sam. 4. David had become greater because Yahweh was with him, but that means David's leadership was shaped by obedience to Yahweh's command. Yahweh took the lead, but David was still involved in the battle.

**6:1-2** After making Jerusalem the center of political and military power in the nation, David decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, making the city the dwelling place of Yahweh and the center of spiritual power in the nation. The Ark of the Covenant's proximity to Philistine territory as a significant symbol of Yahweh's power may also have conveyed a message to the Philistines.<sup>97</sup> David created a government that united civic and sacral authority, but in doing so he also promoted his own position.

**6:3-5** David sent men to load the Ark of the Covenant onto a cart and brought it from the house of the priest Abinadab. There are several things wrong in this scene. First, the Ark of the

<sup>97</sup> See R. D. Bergen. *1, 2 Samuel*, p. 328.

Covenant was to be in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:31-35). Instead, it was in the house of a priest, and there is no mention of the tabernacle. Second, it was to be carried with poles on the shoulders of the family of the Kohathites of the tribe of Levi (Num. 4:15). Instead, David had some men load it onto a cart. And it is unclear whether Abinadab's sons were Kohathites. Third, the Ark of the Covenant was supposed to be covered when it was being carried in public view (Ex. 40:21; Num. 4:5-6). There is no mention of whether this had been done. David's careful preparations are noted, but their flaws are suggested by what he had not done. David's approach to transporting the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem was patterned on that of the Philistines in 1 Sam. 6:7, who loaded it onto a cart when they sent it back to Israel. Abinadab's son's familiarity with the Ark of the Covenant doubtless made this seem reasonable. It is never mentioned whether the celebration of David and Israel was in the name of Yahweh or to the nationalism of Israel, but this celebration's language evokes that of the women who greeted Saul in 1 Sam. 18:6 after Goliath's death. Their rejoicing and singing was, unknown to Saul, a precursor to his own failure, and it would also prove to be for David.<sup>98</sup>

**6:6-7** When the Ark of the Covenant began to fall, which it would have never done if they were carrying it correctly, Uzzah reached out to stop it, and Yahweh killed him for his irreverent act. Yahweh was not irrational for killing Uzzah because he tried to protect the Ark of the Covenant. The Law made it clear how it was supposed to be carried, was not to be touched (Num. 4:15), and was to be revered as the holy presence of Yahweh. Uzzah's sin was negligence, and his family had a long enough association with the Ark of the Covenant to know better. David was also responsible for wrongdoing because he transported the Ark of the Covenant this way.

**6:8-9** David became angry and afraid of what Yahweh had done, for he never expected such a divine outburst to happen. This was not reverence for Yahweh but fear of an adversary. That David was transporting the Ark of the Covenant with mixed motives is demonstrated when he asked how he could bring the Ark of the Covenant to *himself*. The Ark of the Covenant would become central to Israel's worship, but David had to learn that he could not control it.<sup>99</sup> David discovered that honoring Yahweh while extending one's own position creates dangerous ambiguity. In 1 Sam. 5:20, Yahweh had "burst" (*prs*) out against the Philistines, and now He had burst (*prs*) out against Uzzah. Both had treated the Ark of the Covenant with irreverence.

**6:10-11** Fearful now of the Ark of the Covenant, David sent it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. 1 Chr. 15:17-19 indicates he was a Levite—"Gittite" cannot mean he was from the Philistine city of Gath but that he was from an Israelite town such as Gath Rimmon or Gath Paddalla, mentioned in the Amarna letters (250.11-14).<sup>100</sup> Obed-Edom must have treated the Ark of the Covenant with reverence since Yahweh blessed him and his family.

**6:12-13** After three months David decided to try again, except this time he would obey the commands of Yahweh in how to treat and carry the Ark of the Covenant. David thus shifted from the Philistine model of moving the Ark of the Covenant to one consistent with the Torah, though this is stressed more in 1 Chr. 15:1-15. They also sacrificed animals, probably to sanctify the path from the previous sinful attempt. The rejoicing associated with this is less defined than in

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<sup>98</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 376.

<sup>99</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 376.

<sup>100</sup> See A. A. Anderson. *2 Samuel*, p. 105.

the first attempt, though the use of such a positive motif suggests his fear of the Ark of the Covenant has been overcome.<sup>101</sup> David learned from his mistake in ways Saul did not.

A key theme of this chapter is the proper understanding of kingship in Israel. The king was to be subject to the sovereignty of Yahweh and to serve His will and glory. This is seen in the fact that “King David” is used for the first time in this chapter.

**6:14-15** David also joined in the celebration of Yahweh while wearing a linen ephod. The linen ephod was a garment typically associated with priests (1 Sam. 2:18, 28). David may have acquired a priestly role, comparable to a chaplain, with Jerusalem’s capture, a theme hinted at in Ps. 110:4.<sup>102</sup> If so, it would explain his close connection to the Ark of the Covenant in this chapter and the fact that the name Jerusalem is never mentioned in this chapter but always “the city of David,” which is consistent with Ps. 132:1-10.

**6:16** When Michal saw David, she despised him. That this is not simply a matter of marital relations is clear from Michal’s description as “Saul’s daughter.” That is also why it is noted that David danced before Yahweh, something not previously made explicit. The contrast between David and Saul was ultimately seen in their understanding of the king’s position before Yahweh. Michal represents the house of Saul and the one that did not lead the nation in worship.

**6:17-19** David had the Ark of the Covenant placed in a tent in Jerusalem, and he offered burnt offerings for atonement (Lev. 1:3-9) and fellowship offerings (Lev. 3:1-17). David then blessed the people in the name of Yahweh of the heavenly hosts (armies) and distributed food from the fellowship offering to the people (Lev. 7:11-18). What was celebrated was Yahweh’s enthronement over Israel. David was the guardian of the Ark of the Covenant, and he desired to have it in his city, but he ruled under Yahweh’s greater authority. David had authority only because of Yahweh’s superiority.

**6:20-23** Ironically, when David came home to bless his *house*, Michal of the *house* of Saul cursed him for the way he had publicly conducted himself. Michal did not speak of his dancing but claimed that he had exposed himself before the lowest of the low. Though she referred to David as king, she did not see him as worthy of the position. The reference to the ephod makes it clear that David was clothed. The exposure that troubled Michal was probably that David had removed his kingly garments and acted as one of the common people, which revealed him as one who did not behave in a manner she believed befitted a king.

However, an Israelite king is honored because he worships enthusiastically with the people, not by behaving like traditional kings of the nations (1 Sam. 8:5). An Israelite king must function as Yahweh’s image and not for personal greatness. The Ark of the Covenant’s delivery to Jerusalem represents a highlight in David’s reign, and though the narrator points out the flaws in David’s approach, he shows that David’s intention was to worship Yahweh. This intention is emphasized in David’s conflict with Michal.<sup>103</sup>

Michal’s inability to have children could have been Yahweh’s judgment, but it could also have been because David never went to her again. But the reason is unimportant. What matters is that

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<sup>101</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 377.

<sup>102</sup> See R. D. Bergen. *1, 2 Samuel*, pp. 329-330.

<sup>103</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 373.

the rift between the house of Saul and David was now complete. No heir would unite the families. Israel's unity would instead be found in its worship of Yahweh.<sup>104</sup>

**7:1-3** Yahweh giving rest to David means He had delivered him from all his enemies and they were no longer a threat. This was not true of the reign of Saul due to his inability to recognize the ultimate kingship of Yahweh. David had reached a point where his desire to construct a temple for Yahweh was possible. Deut. 12:1-14 expected that when the Israelites occupied the land and had destroyed the Canaanite shrines, Israel would worship Yahweh in a central place.

Rather than acting on his own initiative, David went to Nathan, the prophet of Yahweh, with his desire to construct a temple for Yahweh. This is the first time Nathan is mentioned. David's statement that it was not right for him to be in a palace and Yahweh to be in a tent shows that he was acting in gratitude, not grasping for power and recognition from Yahweh. Nathan, truly believing that Yahweh would approve, gave David permission to build the temple.

**7:4-7** That night Yahweh came to overturn Nathan's blessing for the temple. This shows that even the prophet misunderstood the full purpose of the tabernacle tent and acted without consulting Yahweh. Nathan probably avoided judgment because he submitted to Yahweh's will and communicated it to David the next morning.

This is the longest message spoken from Yahweh since He spoke to Moses. David is called Yahweh's servant just as Moses was (Josh. 1:2, 7). Yahweh made it clear that David had no authority to build a temple of Yahweh, for Yahweh had never asked for one. If He wanted a temple, He would have commanded it a long time ago. But instead He had Moses build a tabernacle, which had served its purpose just as Yahweh had intended it to. The purpose of the tabernacle was its ability to travel and be with all the people in the Promised Land. The main point here is that the temple building cannot be initiated by humans any more than kingship could be initiated by humans (1 Sam. 8:4-9). David could not build a house for Yahweh because David remained under Yahweh's authority.

**7:8-11a** The Davidic Covenant is initiated here, though the word covenant is notably, and somewhat surprisingly, absent. Later poetic reflections speak of this passage as a covenant (2 Sam. 23:1-7; Ps. 89, 132).

Yahweh went on and made it clear that He had raised David from humble origins and made him great. He had defeated David's enemies and given him rest. Yahweh had promised to establish His chosen people in the land and had fulfilled that promise. The reference to "my people" is rich in covenantal allusions that reaches back to Ex. 19:4-6 since it reflects Israel's special status. The point is that David and Israel could not make Yahweh's name great; He makes them great, and this brings Him glory.

**7:11b-13** 2 Sam. 7:11b is set off from what precedes and what follows by its use of the third person, whereas elsewhere Yahweh's speech is reported in the first person. By 2 Sam. 7:12, the narrator returns to direct address to David. David is now addressed in covenantal terms. Yahweh made a covenant with David, that He would build for David a house that would last forever through his descendants. Yahweh gave a new meaning for the word "house." David was not allowed to build Yahweh a "house" (temple), but Yahweh would build David a "house" (family line, dynasty).

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<sup>104</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 379.

Yahweh promised that He would raise up one of David's sons and that He would establish David's kingdom. This son would then build a house for Yahweh's name. This *house* that David's son would build cannot be a temple because Yahweh had made it clear that He did not want one and had forbidden it. Second, Yahweh had redefined the meaning of *house* to refer to a family line. Third, this *house* would be for Yahweh's *name*, which is used throughout the Bible to refer to His character, reputation, and glory. "Name" can also refer to a family line (Ruth 4:5). Therefore, the *house* that David's son would build would be the continued fulfillment of Yahweh's promises of rest (this is the emphasis of the context) to His chosen, kingdom people (his true house: Ex. 19:5-6; Lev. 22:18; Num. 12:7; Heb. 3:1-6), where He promised to put His name (Deut. 12:5, 11; 14:23; 28:9-10; Neh. 1:9) and make them into a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3) for generations to come. This promise is rich in Abrahamic allusions (Gen. 12:1-3; 17). The promise's future reference obliquely refers to Solomon's kingdom, though the Second Testament (and later uses in Ps. 2, 132) took this in a messianic sense. A messianic theme is slightly more explicit in 1 Chr. 17:14 through a change in pronoun. David and Solomon misunderstood this use of *house* and went on to build the temple that Yahweh had forbidden (1 Kgs. 5-8).

**7:14-15** The father-son language, like the references to David as Yahweh's servant, is typical of covenantal language. Yahweh made it clear that when David's family line sinned, He would punish them, but He would not reject David's family line like he had with Saul before him. The absence of conditional phrases (*if...then*) and the emphasis on permanent and forever, reveal that this was an unconditional covenant. David may have come perilously close to repeating the problem generated by the people's request in 1 Sam. 8 or seeking to determine and limit Yahweh's role, but where Saul was ultimately rejected, David remained acceptable to Yahweh because of his special role.

**7:18-29** David's immediate response was to praise Yahweh. He humbled himself before Yahweh and recognized his own unworthiness. David praised Yahweh for all the things He had done and thus believed He would fulfill this promise as well. The fulfillment of Yahweh's promises is what brings Him glory.

**8:1** The time reference in "after this" is uncertain. If a link to 2 Sam. 5:17-25 is intended, then the victory over the Philistines described here is subsequent to those previously narrated, since those battles were about securing Israelite territory, whereas this account refers to capturing of Philistine territory. But 2 Sam. 7 must be later still since it states that Yahweh gave rest to David from his enemies. So, a precise chronology seems impossible.<sup>105</sup> There is no claim that the Philistines became subservient to David, though the Pelethites (2 Sam. 8:18) were probably Philistine mercenaries who served David.

**8:2** David defeated the Moabites, who lived southwest of Israel, and killed a third of them. In a world where all captured troops could be put to death, David's actions might be viewed as lenient.<sup>106</sup> The important point is that Moab became subservient to David and accordingly began to pay tribute.

**8:3-6a** David defeated King Hadadezer in southern Mesopotamia when he extended his authority to the Euphrates River. David's authority reaching the Euphrates River was a fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham that He would give him all the land of Israel all the way to the

<sup>105</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 395-396.

<sup>106</sup> See R. D. Bergen. *1, 2 Samuel*, p. 347.

Euphrates River (Gen. 15:18; Deut. 11:24; Josh. 1:4). The hamstringing of the horses would not prevent their use in agriculture. David conquered the land of the Arameans, which lay between Israel and the Euphrates.

**8:6b-8** Yahweh gave victory to David wherever he went. This statement has two important functions. First, it shows that the glory from these battles belonged to Yahweh, not David. Second, it explains how David defeated such significant forces. That David could transport all this material safely back to Jerusalem indicates his control of the trade routes north of Israel, creating a context where Israel's wealth could increase.

**8:9-14** Hamath was a neo-Hittite city north of Zobah, and there had apparently been considerable conflict between Toi and Hadadezer. David took the tribute of King Toi and dedicated it to Yahweh along with the tribute from all the other nations around him. David also defeated the other nations that immediately surrounded Israel—Amalek south of Israel, Edom south of Israel, Moab southwest of Israel, Ammon east of Israel, and the Philistines within the western territory of Israel. This list indicates that for the first time Israel occupied the territory promised in Gen. 15:18-21. That David did not keep the wealth or the horses for himself shows that he was acting consistently with Deut. 17:14-20 and could be considered a just king.

**8:15-18** Unlike with Saul, there is evidence of the establishment of the machinery of state. This power of state is open to abuse, and would be abused by David, which is why the overall summary of his reign needs to stress his positive achievements. David acted as a final court of appeal for the contentious issues (2 Sam. 12:1-6 and 2 Sam. 14:4-7) and provided justice to the people. In spite of David's failings, this final statement is unequivocal in insisting that the ultimate assessment of David be positive.

**9:1-5** Now that Yahweh had established David's kingdom, David was now in a position to bless others. To be true to his covenant with Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:12-17), David sought to bless the descendants in the house of Saul. Ziba, the servant of Saul, was found and told David about Mephibosheth, the crippled son of Jonathan (2 Sam. 4:4).

**9:6-8** David then invited Mephibosheth to join his family and eat at his table where he would be provided for and protected the rest of his life. Here David was going counter to the culture of his time, in which a king of a new dynasty would typically wipe out all the descendants of the previous dynasty in order to secure their hold on the throne. Mephibosheth, knowing this fact, was shocked that David would show such lovingkindness to him.

**9:9-13** David then commanded Ziba that all that had belonged to Saul now belonged to Mephibosheth and that he was to become Mephibosheth's servant as he had served Saul. The mention of Ziba having fifteen sons and twenty servants of his own hints at the fact that Ziba had inherited all the land of Saul for himself and his sons. Now David had taken this inheritance and given it to a crippled man, whom he now had to serve. This lays the foundation for Ziba's unrest that will lead to his betraying David and Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 16:1-4; 19:24-30).

The mention of Mephibosheth's son emphasizes that David's covenant with Jonathan was going to live on through the descendants of Mephibosheth, who now had an inheritance because of David.



## V. David's Reign and Troubles (10:1-20:25)

This division describes the events that counter the positive assessments of 2 Sam. 5:17-8:18 and 2 Sam. 21:1-24:25. David had been the model king in his faithfulness to Yahweh, promoting justice in the land and not violating the Deuteronomic regulations concerning the king (Deut. 17:14-20) by not amassing horses and wealth. But suddenly David falls and blatantly violates Yahweh's Law, bringing chaos into his family. Earlier the narrator portrayed David as the new Joshua-Caleb, who defeated Israel's enemies and brought peace to Israel. Now the narrator begins to portray him as the new Samson, ruled by his lust and oblivious to Yahweh and everything that was happening around him. But his fall has been foreshadowed in his willingness to violate the Deuteronomic regulations for the king (Deut. 17:14-20) when it came to the amassing of wives (2 Sam. 3:2-5; 5:13-16). David would begin to look more like Saul, who violated the justice of Yahweh. This is seen in the fact that Yahweh is largely absent from these chapters. Yahweh is mentioned only in 2 Sam. 12 with His judgment against David and David's repentance, and at the end of 2 Sam. 15 when David was fleeing his son Absalom. This emphasizes that this was a dark time in David's life when it came to his relationship with Yahweh.

2 Sam. 10-20 is serial narration, where each episode requires and builds on the episodes that preceded it. These chapters tell a fluid story of the chaos that came to David's house and of Absalom's rebellion.

### A. David's Sin Against Uriah and Bathsheba (10:1-12:31)

This section begins by developing the conflict with the Ammonites, which sets the stage for David's failure to function as a just king when he was not where he was supposed to be, with his army. David began to be corrupted by his power and began to act like all the other kings and take what he wanted when he wanted. This leads to the biggest perversion of justice in David's reign, which would lead to complete chaos within his household and the nation.

**10:1-2a** The main function of 2 Sam. 10 is to provide the context for 2 Sam. 11:1-12:25, which provides the trigger for the rebellion in 2 Sam. 13-20.<sup>107</sup> The Ammonites were the nation directly east of the Jordan River, the Transjordan region occupied by the tribes of Reuben and Gad. King Nahash was presumably the person mentioned in 1 Sam. 11 as Saul's enemy. Sometime in his reign, David had established a good relationship with Nahash and his son Hanun (2 Sam. 17:27). As with Mephibosheth, David decided to show kindness to Hanun.

**10:2b-6** Hanun's commanders convinced Hanun that David's men were coming not to honor him but to spy out the land in order to seize it. So Hanun humiliated the men and sent them back to David. Shaving off half their beards attacked their dignity as adults since Israelite males had a full beard, apart from expressions of mourning (Jer. 41:5), while exposing their buttocks and genitals was something normally done only to prisoners of war (Isa. 20:3-5). David protected the dignity of the men by sending them to Jericho, which was a small village, until their beards grew back.

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<sup>107</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 407.

The Ammonites then hired mercenaries from the surrounding culture to get ready for the attack that would surely come from David in response to their humiliation of him as king. The narrator makes it clear that throughout all this, David was not the aggressor.

**10:7-14** David responded by sending Joab to attack the Ammonites. Joab was severely outnumbered by the Ammonites and the Arameans, so he divided his army into two regiments in an attempt to separate the two nations from each other and weaken them. Both the Ammonites and Arameans fled despite their superior numbers. But Joab did not press home the advantage and take the city. No reason is given for this, though 2 Sam. 11:1 suggests that it was the wrong time of the year to besiege a city. At this point, Aram and Ammon were defeated but not subjugated.

**10:15-19** After being defeated, Hadadezer, the king of the Arameans, brought even more soldiers from the Euphrates River in order to attack Israel again. This time David personally led his army out to meet the Arameans across the Jordan River. Again the Arameans fled from Israel and made peace with David and refused to continue to help the Ammonites.

**11:1** In the spring, when it was better to go to war and put cities under siege, David sent Joab to defeat the Ammonites. The main point that is being made by the narrator is that David should have gone to war with Joab but did not. This is emphasized by both statements “in the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab” and “but David remained in Jerusalem.” This contrasts what David should have done and what he did do. Now he was left in a palace and city where the majority of the men were gone, increasing the chance for idleness and boredom.

**11:2-5** In the evening, while David was on the roof of the palace, he saw a woman bathing on her roof. It must be understood that bathing on the roof was not an uncommon thing in the ancient Near East. Roofs were often used as another living space, and basins of water would be put on the roof so that the sun could heat the water throughout the day. Likewise, Bathsheba most likely was not completely naked and would have been washing from a wash basin rather than submerged in a bath tub. She was also bathing at night, when most people would be asleep, and at a time when the men were off to war.

But the narrator’s emphasis is that she was purifying herself from her monthly period. According to Lev. 15:19-23, a woman was to cleanse herself with water each day of her period and for seven days after her period. The narrator is making the point that Bathsheba was obedient to the Law. But it also makes the point that when David noticed her, Bathsheba was at the point of her cycle when she was most likely to conceive.

David sent a messenger to learn more about the woman. The messenger reported to David that she was Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite. Apart from her beauty the narrator gives no insights into her character. In fact, apart from 2 Sam. 11:3 she is never called Bathsheba but always spoken of in relationship to others. By mentioning her relational connections she is seen as less of an object to be used. However, this did not stop David, who sent for her, took her, and sent her away.

This is not a story of a romantic affair but of rape. David is the active force in the narrative. The repeating verb in this story is “sent” (*shalach*). The only active verbs describing Bathsheba are when she purified herself (2 Sam. 11:4), reported her pregnancy (2 Sam. 11:5), and mourned for her husband (2 Sam. 11:26). The story says nothing about their interaction and even suggests that David would have never seen her again if she had not become pregnant. In the ancient Near East,

saying no to the king brought death. Bathsheba had to choose between rape and death. David's interaction with Bathsheba is one line, yet the verb "sent" (*shalach*) dominates the story. David "sent" Joab, "sent" the messenger, and "sent" for Bathsheba. This shows that the real sin is not the sexual encounter but David's abuse of power and treatment of everyone as objects for his own gain. David had become the king who takes (*laqach*: 2 Sam. 11:4), the king of whom Samuel had warned (1 Sam. 8:10-18).

Bathsheba then "sent" (*shalach*) word to David that she was pregnant. Now the real-life consequences of his decision were upon him. Yet David would still control and use people to cover the sin.

**11:6-11** David then "sent" (*shalach*) word to Joab to have him "send" (*shalach*) Uriah the Hittite to him. David was bringing Uriah the Hittite home in order to sleep with Bathsheba so that Uriah and everyone else would think that the baby was Uriah's. For Uriah to have sex with his wife would be a breach of the Law. Uriah did not sleep with Bathsheba, for he did not believe it was right to be with his wife when his men could not be with theirs. Uriah the Hittite showed more self-control with his own wife than David had with her.

**11:12-13** David then attempted to eliminate Uriah's self-control by getting him drunk. The narrator makes it clear that David made him drunk. Once again, one did not say no to the king. Yet even drunk Uriah the Hittite showed more self-control than David did sober.

**11:14-17** David then "sent" (*shalach*) Uriah the Hittite back to Joab with a letter that commanded Joab to kill Uriah the Hittite on the battlefield. To kill Uriah through an obvious withdrawal, as David had asked, would place blame upon Joab and could damage morale. His method, placing Uriah where the strongest opposition was and inciting a counter-attack, cost the lives of others along with Uriah. Joab had joined David in the murder of an innocent man.

**11:18-21** Joab then "sent" (*shalach*) word to David about the loss of men in the battle. If David got angry, then the messenger was to also add that Uriah the Hittite was dead. Joab's allusion to Judg. 9 did more than provide a piece of military history. The reference to Abimelech's bloody attempted kingship in Shechem and death at Thebez (Judg. 9:52-53) points to an earlier story in Israel's history where monarchy abused those it was meant to serve, thus linking this narrative's abuses with the earlier one.

**11:22-25** The messenger told David the message but did not even wait to see if David got mad but immediately told him that Uriah the Hittite was dead. David responded in a very callused way, stating that the sword devours one and not another and no one knows why. But the irony is that David did know.

**11:26-27** Once the week of mourning was over, David took Bathsheba to be his wife. David believed that he had gotten away with it. Yet Yahweh knew, and David's actions displeased Him.

**12:1b-4** The phrase "Yahweh 'sent' (*shalach*)" shows that Yahweh is the ultimate authority and king. However, Yahweh would not abuse his power but bring judgment on the one who had. Nathan told a story of a wealthy man who took the lamb of a poor man for his own purposes. The point of the story is that both the wealthy man and David abused the less powerful.

**12:5-7a** David immediately became angry at the injustice of wealthy man and condemned him to repay the man seven times over. The man's lack of pity not only provides an important emotional response to the parable but also is the bridge needed to return to Nathan. David

identified with the poor man, but Nathan reshaped his perceptions to identify with the rich by declaring him the guilty man. The judge was being judged. Nathan could have just straight out condemned David, but instead he told a story that would lead David to condemning himself so that he could not rationalize what he had done.

**12:7b-10** Yahweh then declared through Nathan that He was the one who had made David king and had given him everything he had. If David had just gone to Yahweh as king for his needs rather than seizing autonomy, none of this would have happened. Thus, David had despised the word of Yahweh. Yahweh then turned David's own words back on him (2 Sam. 11:25) and declared that the sword would come to his house now for the rest of his life. This hints at Absalom and Sheba's revolts ahead. David took, becoming the monarch of whom Samuel warned (1 Sam. 8:10-19). Now he would discover the bitter consequences of such a choice.

**12:11-12** The second judgment was that a neighbor would come and take some of his wives and sleep with them in broad daylight. The language of the neighbor evokes 1 Sam. 15:28, highlighting how close David had come to emulating Saul and losing his kingdom. The punishment reverses what Yahweh had previously done for David (2 Sam. 12:7b-8).

**12:13-14** Once again, it is David's lack of rationalizing and his immediate repentance that mark him as different from Saul. Even though he had sinned in a grievous way against Yahweh and others, ultimately he was willing to submit to the sovereignty of Yahweh's will and judgment. This is probably why Yahweh forgave David and why David did not lose the kingdom and his life; according to the Law he should have been executed for murder.

However, Yahweh declared that his child with Bathsheba must die. The narrator does not explain why the child must die, though it is possible that David could claim Uriah's estate through the child, deriving benefit from his attack on Uriah.<sup>108</sup> David could not avoid his sin's consequences, and neither could he enjoy the blessings of life within it.

**12:15-23** David's child became sick, and David mourned and prayed for seven days that the child might be healed. When the child died, David cleaned up and resumed his kingly duties. David knew that Yahweh was a merciful God and could choose to answer David's prayer and heal the child. But when the child died, he submitted to the justice of Yahweh.

**12:24-25** David had another child with Bathsheba, whom they named Solomon, which may mean "peace" (1 Chr. 22:18) or "replacement." Yahweh named him Jedidiah, which means "beloved of Yahweh" This name appears nowhere else in the Bible. It may have been a family nickname, or Solomon was his throne name.

**12:29-31** Meanwhile Joab continued to fight the Ammonites. This time David went out too and led the battle against the Ammonites. David conquered them and made himself king over their territory. David's reign depended upon his relationship with Yahweh. Although problems would continue, he could still reign effectively because of his repentance.

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<sup>108</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 428.

## B. David's House in Ruin (13:1-17:23)

This section covers the chaos and fallout of David's sin within his own household. The narrator shows how the older sons gradually disqualify themselves from succession as king because of their inability to submit to Yahweh and promote His justice. It was Amnon and Absalom, David's first- and third-born sons, who rip David's household apart. Kileab, the second-born son (2 Sam. 3:2-5), is never mentioned, which means he might have died earlier in the reign of David.

**13:1-10** Amnon became obsessed with love for his half-sister Tamar but did not know how he could be with her. His obsession was so great that he became ill. Amnon's advisor, who was also his cousin, advised him to pretend that he was sick and to ask for Tamar to come and take care of him. So Amnon did as advised, and David sent Tamar to take care of him.

**13:11-14** Amnon then sent everyone out of the room and demanded that Tamar have sex with him. Tamar refused to sleep with him. She made the argument that it would ruin both of their lives personally and socially if he did such a thing. She then stated that if he asked David for her, she would be given to him in the right way. Brothers and sisters marrying each other was prohibited by Lev. 18:9 and Deut. 27:22. It may be that the Law was not enforced within the royal family or that her statement was a ploy to try to prevent the rape. However, he ignored her cry and argument and raped her. Amnon was just like his father.

**13:15-19** Then Amnon hated her more than he had ever loved her. The narrator emphasizes his hatred by using the word "hate" four times. "Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred. For the hatred with which he hated her...." In his mind Amnon had fantasized about them being together, and in his fantasies she was always willing. However, in reality she was not willing. So, he hated her because she had ruined his fantasies when she didn't follow along with his script.

Amnon then commanded her to get out, but Tamar pleaded with him to not send her away, for that would be worse than what he had already done—though how it was worse is left unsaid. He then kicked her out. As she left, she put ashes on her head and tore her "robe" (*kethoneth*) that signified her as an unmarried woman, and she mourned like a widow—except that she had never been married only raped.

**13:20-20** When Absalom, Tamar's full brother, saw her, he immediately assumed that Amnon had done this to her. This shows that Absalom already had a rivalry with Amnon and is not surprised that Amnon would do something like this. So, the question is why did David not know this about Amnon? Absalom told her to stay with him, for she did not have the power to get justice against her brother, but he could do it for her.

**13:21-22** When David found out what Amnon had done, he was furious, yet he did not punish Amnon for his crimes. Once again, David was passive when it came to punishing the ones who were close to him. Absalom hated Amnon and never spoke to him again. David had perverted justice again.

**13:23-29** Two years later, Absalom's sheep shearers were at Ba'al Hazor, which was about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. After the shearing of the sheep, the men would have a celebration because of the income that had just been gained for the year. Absalom asked his father to join him at the celebrations. But David refused because he was afraid he would be a burden. Why would a father who is invited to a party by his son be a burden? This is like the father who is too busy at work to come to his son's sports games. Absalom requested that at least Amnon come.

This seemed odd to David, but he agreed to it. How did David not know how Absalom felt about Amnon after all these years? It could be that David was not around as a father to notice these things about his children or that he was in denial to the true nature of his family.

Absalom ordered his men to kill Amnon when he was drunk and when Absalom had given the signal to do so. When they killed Amnon, all the other brothers there fled out of fear that they were next.

**13:30-36** The report reached David that all his sons were dead, and he began to mourn their deaths. Jonadab told David that most likely only Amnon was dead for this was what Absalom had wanted for the last two years. Jonadab's insight shows that David should have known this too. The turmoil and violence in David's house was the result of the judgment of Yahweh for David's sin (2 Sam. 12:9-12).

**13:37-39** Absalom fled to the home of his maternal grandparents in Geshur (2 Sam. 3:3), which was a buffer state toward Aram. Absalom spent three years in Geshur before the story continues. Absalom fled because he was now under the death penalty for murder. Yet one wonders if David would actually execute that judgment.

**14:1-3** The narrator does not state Joab's motives for wanting to bring Absalom back. Joab later ignored Absalom (2 Sam. 14:28-33), so it must be assumed that his concern was with David alone, and he saw Absalom's return as a means of serving his king, even if David did not recognize the need. The Tekoa woman's speech suggests that Joab was concerned about David having no heir after the death of Amnon and the banishing of Absalom. Perhaps Joab did not see David's other sons as worthy or perhaps as too young. So, Joab sent a wise woman from Tekoa, which was about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, to pretend she was mourning and speak the words of Joab to David.

In the previous chapter, Amnon followed the advice of the "wise man" Jonadab to trick his father and rape his sister (2 Sam. 13:3-5). Now Joab used a "wise woman" to trick David. David's court was a place where wisdom had been perverted. But David had set this precedent with the way he deceived Uriah the Hittite.

**14:4-7** The woman told a story of one of her sons murdering her other son. And that the village wanted to kill the murderer, which means her line would be wiped out. The Law required the death penalty, and this was demanded within the clan for whom blood revenge was expected, but the woman's case suggests possible grounds for mercy rather than the letter of the law (Ex. 21:12-14; Num. 35:30-34). A family's destruction could be sufficient for withholding the normal punishment (Deut. 25:5-10).<sup>109</sup> The problem with this argument in this case is that mercy and forgiveness only come with repentance (2 Sam. 12:13-14), which Absalom had not demonstrated. And David had many other sons.

**14:8-24** David responded by pardoning her son. The woman then accused David of not doing the same thing for his own son. David then suspected that Joab was behind this persuasion. David then pardoned Absalom so that he would be allowed to return, but he refused to see Absalom and did not restore him to the royal court.

The woman called David "an angel of God in discerning good and evil" (2 Sam. 14:17), but the irony is that he was not and had often perverted justice—in the murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 11:6-

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<sup>109</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 445.

27), in ignoring the fact that Amnon raped Tamar (2 Sam. 13:21-22), and now in deciding to restore the murderer Absalom, who should be executed. The woman also proclaimed that David knew everything that happened in the land. The irony is that the narrator portrays David as the one who was ignorant of what was happening around him, only finding out when it is too late. David had perverted justice again.

**14:25-27** The narrator then states that Absalom was incredibly good looking. Hair weight is hyperbolic (unless it means wet) and speaks to the hair quality. The point is that Absalom's good looks made him a prime candidate for king (1 Sam. 16:7). The mention of his daughter Tamar, named after his sister, reminds the reader of Absalom's motive for later moving against David.

**14:28-33** With great arrogance Absalom tried to summon Joab to him several times but was ignored each time. Like a spoiled brat who did not get what he wanted, Absalom burned Joab's field in order to get his attention. Absalom wanted to see his father. David then passively received Absalom and accepted him back into the royal court. Like he did with Joab and Amnon, David passively overlooked the crime of his son and acted like nothing had happened. Likewise, David also opened himself up to the rebellion of Absalom against him.

**15:1-6** Absalom rode a chariot and horse with fifty men to run ahead and announce his coming. The point was to flaunt his wealth and power as a prelude to his grab for power. Absalom sat in the city gates where the local judges sat and proclaimed to all who came that he would give them justice, unlike the distant king David. A member of the royal family had welcomed them personally. All his actions were for winning the hearts of the people. His move for the throne was so obvious, it is surprising that David did not act immediately, but this may suggest Absalom had tapped into sources of disappointment with David's reign from the outset.

**15:7-12** Whether this is four years since he returned or four years since he fled for Geshur is unclear. The former is more likely, although in either case it is a long time between the vow and its fulfillment (Deut. 23:21). Absalom asked David for permission to go to Hebron to fulfill a vow to Yahweh. In reality, he was going to the former throne of the kingdom in order to overthrow David. How Absalom gained support in Judah is unclear unless there was already resentment at David's moving the capital from Hebron to Jerusalem. Absalom then sought out all of his supporters to aid in his rebellion against David, including Ahithophel, David's advisor.

**15:13-18** Absalom's support looked so great that it made David fear for his life, flee the throne in Jerusalem, and go into hiding. David took his household, court, and personal bodyguards with him. He left ten of his concubines behind to run the palace. These concubines might have been Jebusites whose marriage to David symbolized his rule over Jerusalem, but whom he could not take with him since his flight relinquished his control over Jerusalem.<sup>110</sup>

**15:19-23** David then encouraged Ittai the Gittite, a Philistine, and his men to return to Jerusalem. They had only recently joined him and did not need to go into hiding over something that did not affect them. Ittai the Gittite professed that he believed in Yahweh and that David was Yahweh's anointed king and so would stay with and be faithful to the will of Yahweh. Apart from the wise woman's staged comments (2 Sam. 14:11-20), Yahweh had neither been mentioned nor directly active since Solomon's renaming (2 Sam. 12:24). This foreigner knew better than the Israelites what Yahweh was doing and thus pledged himself to David, the opposite of how David saw things in 1 Sam. 17:41-47.

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<sup>110</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 456.

**15:24-29** David then told the priests Zadok and Abiathar to take the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. If he had found favor in Yahweh's eyes, then Yahweh would allow him to return to Jerusalem and see the Ark of the Covenant again. Nathan had stated that the sword would not depart from David's house but had made no comment on whether David could be removed from the throne, so David's language was still circumspect. Also, by sending them back, David had established an intelligence network in the city using the priests and their sons (2 Sam. 15:35-36).

These encounters enabled the narrator to portray David more positively as one who was again prepared to submit to Yahweh's reign even as he also displayed his native cunning. Faith in Yahweh is again central, though ironically David was reminded of this by a Philistine.

**15:30-31** David continued eastward (a symbol of exile) through the Kidron Valley and over the Mount of Olives, mourning. David prayed to Yahweh, the first time since 2 Sam. 12, that Yahweh would turn the council of Ahithophel into foolishness. This is the decisive point where David reconnected his faith with experience. He not only hoped Yahweh would act for him but also prayed He would.

**15:32-37** David then met Hushai the Arkite and convinced Hushai to serve him by going to Jerusalem and advising Absalom in such a way as to frustrate the council of Ahithophel. All information was to be relayed back to David through the priesthood.

**16:1-4** David then encountered Ziba, who had provided him with donkeys and food to aid him in his travels. When David asked Ziba why he had brought the supplies, Ziba shrewdly avoided David's question. Ziba then falsely told David that Mephibosheth had betrayed David and joined the side of Absalom. David, without investigating the matter, then gave all the lands and holdings of Mephibosheth to Ziba. If things went well for David, then Ziba would be remembered by David, but if Absalom prospered, then Ziba had lost only the provisions. The fact that David mentioned Ziba's master shows that David still saw Ziba as a supporter of Saul.

**16:5-14** David also encountered Shimei, from the same clan as Saul, who threw rocks at David and cursed him for death of Saul's house. He called David a murderer and a "man of Belial." The reference to murder may refer to 2 Sam. 21:1-14. Shimei falsely saw David's exile as punishment for taking the kingship from Saul when it was Yahweh who had taken it. Shimei's incorrect claim is important, however, because it again raises the question of how Yahweh was involved in the process and who can interpret events.

David refused to harm Shimei for his harmless words when his own son was rebelling against him. It was Yahweh's job to get justice for David if he deserved it. The allusion shows that David knew he was experiencing the punishment announced by Nathan and had to balance its reality with the hope that Yahweh might restore him.

**16:15-19** Meanwhile, Absalom and his men took the city of Jerusalem and throne of Israel with no conflict. There Hushai presented himself to Absalom as his loyal advisor. 2 Sam. 16-17 is primarily interested in Hushai and Ahithophel's conflict rather than Absalom. Absalom was the pawn played between them, and Ahithophel's importance is stressed, as the verse ends with him.

**16:20-22** Ahithophel then advised Absalom to take the concubines David had left behind and sleep with them on the roof of the palace for all in Israel to see. By doing this, Absalom seized the treaties (wives) and control over Jerusalem. Likewise, this was in fulfillment of Yahweh's judgment against David (2 Sam. 12:9-12). This is reinforced by the fact that the narrator stated that the advice of Ahithophel was like inquiring of Yahweh Himself. However, Absalom's

sleeping with the concubines of David was in breach of Lev. 18:8 and 20:11 and was thus liable to the death penalty. Yahweh was most certainly now against Absalom.

**17:1-4** Ahithophel further advised Absalom to pursue David and strike him now while he was on the run and weak, but to kill only David and the rest would come over to Absalom as David's heir. The twelve thousand men that Absalom had was more men then David had (2 Sam. 15:18).

**17:5-14** Absalom also sought out the advice of Hushai. Hushai advised Absalom to not attack David, for he was one the fiercest fighting men in Israel. David was most likely not with the women and children but with the other fighting men, ready to attack anyone who came their way. If Absalom's men were slaughtered by David and his men, then all of Israel would lose heart and Absalom would lose his support. It is better to take the time to gather all the fighting men throughout Israel so that they could overwhelm David and defeat him easily.

Yahweh made Absalom take the advice of Hushai. This was an answer to David's prayer in 2 Sam. 15:31. Yahweh allowed Absalom to drive David from Jerusalem in judgment for David's sin (2 Sam. 12:9-12), but Yahweh would not support a rebellious son on His earthly throne (1 Sam. 15:23).

**17:15-22** Hushai then reported this news to David through the priests and told David to cross the Jordan. Once David had crossed the Jordan River, it would be much harder for Absalom to make a sudden strike because of the time involved in crossing the Jordan River with an army. The priests then sent Jonathan and Ahimaaz to relay the message to David. While being pursued by Absalom's men, they hid in a well in Bahurim. The wife of the man who owned the well covered it with grain and told Absalom's men that they had already crossed the Jordan River. Then the men escaped and told David everything. The story has the same characterization found in the story of Rahab hiding the spies (Josh. 2:). In this comparison, Absalom is connected to the king of Jericho and thus seen as the enemy. The spies get back to David, who is connected to Joshua and who gained victory over Jericho. The point is that David is backed by Yahweh and would eventually regain control over Jerusalem.

**17:23** When Ahithophel saw that his advice had not been taken, he killed himself. There is poetic justice here, in that the one who opposed Yahweh's anointed by advising his death was now dead. Yahweh had taken a dangerous foe (2 Sam. 16:23) off the playing field. Ahithophel's self-destruction foreshadows the destruction of Absalom. It is also said that he killed himself because his advice had not been taken. One wonders if he had never experienced rejection before and did not know how to handle it.

### C. David's Return to the Throne (17:24-20:25)

This section brings an end to Absalom's rebellion against Yahweh's anointed king. Though Yahweh would still allow the chaos sword to dwell in David's house, He brought it under reign as to not allow it to completely destroy David's house as He promised in 2 Sam. 7.

**17:24-26** David then moved his camp to Mahanaim, which was about 30 miles northeast of the Jordan River crossing. It had been Ish-bosheth's capital (2 Sam. 2:8). Absalom then moved his men across the Jordan River in order to attack David in the region of Gilead. Absalom made Amasa the commander of his army.

**17:27-29** Shobi the Ammonite, Makir, and Barzillai all brought provisions to David to show their support. The point of this is that those in the region of Gilead, east of the Jordan River, were showing their support for David. Absalom had not gained support from this region, and yet this was where his army was about ready to fight David.

**18:1-5** Since David had fled, his army of fighting men had grown to a significant size. This means more people still supported David than he had thought when he first fled. David divided his army among Joab, Abishai, and Ittai the Gittite. David wanted to march with them as well, but Joab advised against it. Normally, if the king died in battle, his son would take the throne. But when the king's son was the enemy, it would not be wise to risk the life of the king. David gave Joab one command: to deal gently with Absalom when they overtook him in battle.

**18:6-8** The battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim, and Absalom's army was greatly overwhelmed and defeated by David's army. The narrator states that the forest killed more men than the sword did. Once again, Yahweh used nature to defeat Israel's enemies as He had in the past with the plagues of Egypt in the book of Exodus and with the storms and rivers in the books of Joshua and Judges. This shows that the victory belonged to Yahweh and was not because of the superiority of David's army.

**18:9-13** While Absalom was fleeing David's army, his long hair got caught in the tree branches and yanked him off his donkey. One of Joab's men saw this and reported it to Joab. Joab rebuked the man for not killing Absalom. But the man made it clear that he would not go against the king's command and harm the son. He also points out that everyone heard this command. This is important to note in order to properly evaluate the actions of Joab and David here.

**18:14-17** Joab then plunged three javelins into Absalom's heart, and his armor bearers struck Absalom with ten swords. This was blatant murder and brutal overkill. Likewise, this was a direct violation of David's commands. Given Joab's past acts of murder and now this, he should be executed for murder. Joab then buried Absalom in the woods and heaped rocks on him. This was a cursed burial of rebellious enemies of Yahweh's people (Josh. 7:26; 8:29; 10:27). Joab then brought an end to the war.

**18:18** The narrator then informs the reader that Absalom had erected a monument in his own honor because he had no son. Absalom's sons must have died because in 2 Sam. 14:27 Absalom was said to have had three sons. This note is significant because Absalom's dishonorable burial cancels out his attempt to glorify himself. And his rebellion ends with him since he had no sons and his name would not continue on.

**18:19-33** It is unclear why Joab initially opposed sending Ahimaaz, unless he felt the Cushite was more expendable should David respond as he had with previous messengers who had delivered bad news (2 Sam. 1:15; 4:12). Ahimaaz serves as one perspective on the battle, that

Yahweh had struck down in judgment those opposed Yahweh's anointed king. In contrast, David's sorrow for the loss of his son reflects another perspective. Earlier David mourned the fact that Absalom was threatening his life and the throne (2 Sam. 15:30). Now he mourned because his son was dead. However, the tragic reality is that David should have realized that he could not have the throne and his rebellious son.

**19:1-8** David's grief was deep and brought a halt to the kingdom. Joab rebuked David for dishonoring the men who had sacrificed so much to fight for him and reinstating him as king by mourning the loss of the enemy they fought against for him. Though David took Joab's advice and stopped mourning, it is important to notice that David still had not dealt with Joab's crimes.

**19:9-15** Israel now struggled with the reality of David's victory. On one hand they sided with Absalom in the rebellion, but on the other hand they acknowledged that David was their king and that it was him who delivered them from the Philistines and all their other enemies. David then won over the hearts of Judah and began to make his way back to the throne in Jerusalem. David also announced that he was going to make Amasa his general in place of Joab. This was a very passive-aggressive way of dealing with Joab. Amasa was another nephew of David, the cousin of Joab.

**19:16-23** On the way back, David encountered Shimei, who begged David for forgiveness for how he had cursed David earlier. Abishai, the brother of Joab, wanted to put Shimei to death, but David rebuked him and said that Abishai and Joab had become adversaries to him. He then pardoned Shimei. But David was also driven by political expedience since his northern power base was limited. When that was resolved, he could leave Shimei's execution to Solomon (1 Kgs. 2:8-9).

**19:24-30** David then encountered Mephibosheth, who informed him that Ziba had betrayed him and took his donkey so that he could not flee with David, since he was crippled. David then ordered that Mephibosheth and Ziba divide the land.

**19:31-38** David wanted to repay Barzillai for taking care of him when he was in hiding by bringing him to the palace to live with him. Barzillai refused, reasoning that he was old and none of that stuff mattered to him anymore, so David took Barzillai's servant instead.

**19:39-43** As David crossed the Jordan River, the ten northern tribes of Israel and Judah began to argue with each other over who had the right to escort the king across the river. This was really about a jockeying for political power. The end of Absalom's revolt had not healed the divisions he had exploited. Instead, by reducing Israel's status relative to Judah, David was more or less back where he began in 2 Sam. 2:1-7.

**20:1-2** Sheba's rebellion is clearly linked with the conflict between the ten northern tribes and Judah at Gilgal at the end of 2 Sam. 19. It is the outcome of those events rather than something independent, since the chapter's first words indicate Sheba was there. Sheba, "a man of Belial," was a Benjaminite who was unhappy with David's reign and decided to rebel. The unchecked rebellion of Absalom opened the door for others to think that they could rebel as well. Likewise, this was a continuation of Yahweh's judgment on David (2 Sam. 12:9-12).

**20:3** David's confinement of the ten concubines was harsh but also a political move to distance himself from what his son had done. It might indicate to the northern tribes a scaling down of court excesses. David was back in Jerusalem, but it was not the place of blessing.

**20:4-13** David sent Amasa to rally the men of Judah to him, and then he sent Abishai to pursue Sheba. Joab had been demoted and was now under the command of Abishai. Joab and Amasa met each other at Gibeon, which was about six miles north of Jerusalem. Joab pretended to greet Amasa and then stabbed him in the belly, killing him. The narrator does not state Joab's motives, but it most likely was because he was jealous of Amasa taking his position of leadership. He may have also not trusted Amasa since he had served under Absalom. The men immediately rallied to Joab's leadership. Then they left Amasa unburied on the side of the road, which would have dishonored him.

Joab's return to power is as important as Sheba's overthrow because Joab's presence points to the possibility of continued violence in David's house (2 Sam. 9-12). Though a violation of Yahweh's Law, Joab's previous murders had benefited David politically. But this murder weakened David, since he had appointed Amasa as army commander in place of Joab to invite the northern tribes to rejoin him.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps David could not break the power of the sons of Zeruiah because he had used it for his own ends in the past (2 Sam. 11:14-21).

**20:14-15** When Joab caught up with Sheba, he put him under siege in the city of Abel Beth Maacah, which was about 85 miles from Gilgal. Joab was willing to destroy an entire city to get one man. Joab was then confronted by the wise woman who lived within the city. She characterized herself as peaceful and trustworthy, something she contrasts with Joab, whose actions were contrary to Deut. 20:10. She questioned his motives because he not only sought to destroy a city with an important role in the caring of the nation of Israel, but he had also sought to destroy a part of Yahweh's heritage. Doing so meant Joab was causing David to surrender the right to rule Yahweh's people.<sup>112</sup>

This wise woman then cut off the head of Sheba and threw it over the wall to Joab. This woman was not willing to give priority to a dangerous man rather than implement justice and protect the well-being of the nation. She is a foil to David and Joab (2 Sam. 14:1-22) who were willing to give priority to the rebellious Absalom over the well-being of the nation. This is an allusion back to the book of Judges where the men failed to be godly and just leaders and so Yahweh began to use the women of Israel to lead and deliver the nation.

**20:23-26** This is the second listing of the officials in David's court (2 Sam. 8:16-18). There are two significant features when comparing the two lists. First, despite Joab's bloody murders, disregard of David's command, and temporary demotion, when it is all said and done, he was still in charge of David's army. This emphasizes King David's failure to implement justice in the nation, especially with close family members.

Second, by the end of his reign, David had a supervisor of forced labor, which was not mentioned in the previous list. This means he had amassed significant forced labor, setting a dangerous precedent for his son Solomon, who would expand it even more and become oppressive (1 Kgs. 4:6; 5:13-14; 12:1-18). This violates the Law, which stated that a king must not elevate himself above his countrymen (Deut. 17:20).

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<sup>111</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 494.

<sup>112</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 497-498.

## VI. The Summary of David's Reign (21:1-24:25)

This division is a final summary of different events in David's reign that demonstrate that though David was a flawed man, he was a king who sought to please Yahweh and submit to Yahweh's will and authority. These chapters are an intentional conclusion to the books of Samuel.

Structurally, this division parallels 2 Sam. 5:17-8:14 and is structured as a chiastic parallelism that emphasizes the psalms of praise that David offered up to Yahweh.

**A** Famine (21:1-14)

**B** Warrior stories (21:15-22)

**C** A psalm (22:1-51)

**C'** A psalm (23:1-7)

**B'** Warrior stories (23:8-39)

**A'** Plague (24:1-5)

The central psalms show David worshiping Yahweh, uniting his private and public life. David the man had learned what David the king knew already, that life is centered on knowing and doing Yahweh's will.<sup>113</sup>

2 Sam. 21-24 are episodic narratives, where each episode is complete in itself and depends upon the completion of the previous episode. These chapters are a final summary of David's reign.

### A. The Gibeonites Avenged for Saul's Sin (21:1-14)

This section corresponds to 1 Sam. 15 – 2 Sam. 4, where the narrator's primary focus was to demonstrate David's superiority to Saul and absolve David of any wrongdoing in the death of Saul and his sons. Here, Saul was the one who violated Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites (Josh. 9) and must be punished. In contrast, it was through David that the Gibeonites received justice.

**21:1-2** The story begins with the fact that there was a famine in the land of Israel. This opening is abrupt, and the narrator makes no attempt to connect to the previous story. In a society without the means to store significant amounts of food, a three-year famine was devastating. David sought Yahweh for why there was a famine, and Yahweh said that He had sent it as a judgment (Lev. 26:20; Deut. 28:24) for Saul killing some of the Gibeonites.

The Gibeonites were Jebusites during the time of Joshua and had tricked Joshua and the other leaders of Israel into making a treaty with them so that they would not be killed (Josh. 9). The treaty they had with Israel meant they were protected and could not be harmed according to the Law of Yahweh. Sometime during Saul's reign, which is not recorded in Scriptures, he murdered a group of Gibeonites. Murder and breach of covenant incurred bloodguilt and required atonement (Num. 35:30-34), normally executed by the kinsman-redeemer, but this had not occurred.

**21:2-6** David then went to the Gibeonites and asked them how they would like to avenge the death of their relatives. The Gibeonites asked for seven of Saul's descendants to be put to death.

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<sup>113</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 502.

Most likely Saul had killed more than seven Gibeonites, but they were content with seven being a symbolic number of completion. David agreed.

**21:7-9** However, David did not give them Jonathan's son Mephibosheth because of the covenant he had made with Jonathan (1 Sam. 20:12-17; 21). But David took seven other descendants of Saul and gave them to Gibeonites to be killed. The Barzillai mentioned here was not the same as Barzillai the Gileadite in 2 Sam. 17:27; 19:32-41.

**21:10** Rizpah, the mother of two of the men who were killed, protected their bodies from the birds and the animals. Since a proper burial was mandated even for criminals (Deut. 21:23), leaving them unburied disgraced them (Jer. 16:4; Amos 4:3). There may also be an allusion to David's words to Goliath (1 Sam. 17:44, 46), which would be fitting in light of the next section. Mostly likely the narrator records this point in order to honor Rizpah's motherly devotion and to remind the reader of the tragic consequences of Saul's sinful actions.

**21:11-14a** David then took the bones of Saul and Jonathan from Jabesh Gilead (1 Sam. 31:11-13) and buried them with the bones of the seven men who were killed in Benjaminite territory. This was David's way of removing the curse from the killed men.

**21:14b** Yahweh then removed the famine from Israel since judgment had been carried out against the house of Saul. Why did Yahweh require this judgment when Scripture says the children should not be punished for the sins of the father (Deut. 24:16; 2 Kgs. 14:6; Ezek. 18)? The Scriptures do have cases in which Yahweh showed that there were negative consequences for descendants of those who sinned against Yahweh (Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Num. 14:18; 16:27, 32).

In each case where children were punished for their parents' sins, direct rebellion against Yahweh was in view. By Saul killing the Gibeonites, he violated a treaty made with Yahweh and thus directly challenged the authority of Yahweh. In the case of Ezek. 18 the children were actively pursuing righteousness, and their ancestors' character would not negate their own behavior.

This demonstrates that the king's (Saul) sin was not only politically important, but it profoundly affected the national well-being in terms of its covenant relationship with Yahweh. Saul's sin was not isolated, impacting only himself and his victims. The whole nation was plunged into famine because of Saul and David's failure to put it right. An alignment between private and public lives was required, one that prepared to put Yahweh's demands first.

## B. Wars Against the Philistines (21:15-22)

The point of this story is that David acknowledged Yahweh as His ultimate protector. This is seen in the fact that time after time Yahweh rescued David from his enemies. He also energized David to be able to defeat his enemies so that he could give security to the people within his kingdom. But David did not fight alone. He had several loyal warriors who fought with him and through whom Yahweh protected David.

**21:15-17a** That David was dealing with the Philistines suggests a time early in his reign, but it is impossible to know whether this preceded 2 Sam. 5:17-25. David's exhaustion in battle here was the first time that David was unable to continue in combat and highlights his limitations. David's life fell into great peril when a particularly imposing Philistine warrior targeted David on the battlefield while he was exhausted. Abishai, Joab's brother, came to David's rescue and killed the Philistine. Though David had rebuked Abishai twice in the past for his desire to kill people (1 Sam. 26:8; 2 Sam. 16:9), on the battlefield his skills were welcomed.

**21:17b** This is the only time in Scripture where the phrase “the lamp of Israel” is used. A lamp is used to light one’s path in the dark, and the light leads the way. David’s men see him as crucial but not necessarily as a warrior. His importance is his ability to guide the nation, again where the private and public roles come together.<sup>114</sup>

**21:18-22** The narrator then lists three other great men who proved themselves loyal to David and key to his success against the Philistines.

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<sup>114</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 510.

### C. David's Praise of Yahweh (22:1-51)

This poem is a witness to David's personal faith, contrasting with its public expression found in 2 Sam. 6. This poem is virtually identical to Psalm 18.

**22:1** The day David describes here is not known unless it was his accession day over Israel and Judah (2 Sam. 5:1-5). This is about what Yahweh had done, not about David.

**22:2-4** The opening omits Ps. 18's first line with its affirmation of commitment to Yahweh. The language of both rock and horn echoes Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:2, 10). There Yahweh was Hannah's rock who exalted His anointed horn, whereas here His anointed (David) reflects on Yahweh as the horn and source of power.

**22:5-20** David proclaims to all that he was about to die, and it was Yahweh to whom he cried out for deliverance. Yahweh responded by coming to his rescue in the whirlwind of His storm. The whirlwind and storm are often used to describe Yahweh coming to render judgment against sinful people of the enemies of Israel (1 Sam. 2:10).

**22:21-25** The reason for Yahweh's deliverance is now stated. David declares that Yahweh rescued him because he had obeyed the Law and lived a blameless life. This may have been before his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah. Though David did have many faults and sins, overall he repented and dealt with his sins when confronted with them. And David submitted himself to will and judgment of Yahweh.

**22:26-31** The emphasis moves from David's righteousness to Yahweh's reliability. David states that Yahweh deals with people according to the way they act.

**22:32-46** David describes Yahweh's nature and actions, then he alternates between what he did and what Yahweh did for him. Here David shows himself joining what Yahweh was doing in the battle against Israel's enemies.

**22:47-49** The poem's closing section draws together the main themes of the whole. Yahweh lives and is the rock who provides security and is therefore blessed and exalted.

## D. David's Last Words (23:1-7)

1 Sam. 22:49 and 1 Sam. 23:1 refer to David as anointed, while the concluding reference to David's offspring in 2 Sam. 22:51 is paralleled by the mention of David's house in 2 Sam. 23:5. Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1-10) and David's lament (2 Sam. 1:4) made references to anointed. David's last words echo Hannah's hope for Yahweh's king.

**23:1** This poem is from the end of David's life, perhaps his final public words. David's words are presented as a prophetic oracle that simultaneously looks to the past and the future. David reflects on his career as king and realizes that his divine election is foundational to everything he has achieved and defines his purpose as king.

**23:2-4** The actual message was given by Yahweh to David and addressed the work of those who rule. Yahweh spoke of the benefits of a righteous ruler. The righteousness of the king and the exercise of justice was to be integral to David's reign (2 Sam. 8:15). Such character and behavior could be found only in the fear of Yahweh. This description of the ideal king is given in Deut. 17:14-20 where the king was to be submitted to Yahweh and was to study the word of Yahweh daily.

The imagery of the sun and brightness represents renewal (Isa. 9:2) and the presence of Yahweh (Isa. 60:3). The imagery of the rain represents divine blessing. The king is viewed as Yahweh's instrument of material blessing and security for the nation (Ps. 72:1-7, 16; 144:12-14). Yahweh has placed order in creation, so also a ruler who governs justly and with the fear of Yahweh brings order to a realm. Such a statement is a memory of what David was, a rebuke because of what he did and a hopeful pointer to what he and any ruler can be.<sup>115</sup>

**23:5-7** David's right standing before Yahweh was what led to Yahweh making a covenant with him. Because David's house stands in relationship with Yahweh, David's sin with Uriah had not terminated the promise. Instead, the language of an eternal covenant is used to insist that Yahweh's promise (2 Sam. 7:1-17) abides. David and his house can again be kingship's model, a model applied throughout kings. David can never be accused of apostasy and can therefore be a model for those who follow.

The oracle then contrasts the just ruler of 2 Sam. 23:3b-4 and the wickedness personified as "Belial." Those evil men who oppose the anointed king of Yahweh would be dealt with and tossed aside by Yahweh. Yahweh would honor His covenant promises.

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<sup>115</sup> See David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 527.

### **E. Thirty-Seven Mighty Men (23:8-39)**

Again, the list shows that victory was not achieved through David alone. Unlike 2 Sam. 21:15-22, Yahweh's involvement is mentioned (2 Sam. 23:10, 12), and David worshiped Yahweh (2 Sam. 23:17). The list is set out in order of rank.

**23:8-12** The narrator tells of the great fights of three men known by the other soldiers as the "three mighty warriors." Each single-handedly stood against the Philistines in a great feat of bravery and victory against the enemy.

**23:13-17** One day they risked their lives and broke through the Philistine lines to bring David water because he was thirsty. Such an action was both brave and foolish but showed their devotion to David. David was so amazed by what they did that he poured out the water as a libation offering to Yahweh (Gen. 35:14; Lev. 23:13; Num. 6:15).

**23:18-23** Though Abishai and Benaiah were not one of the three mighty warriors, they too accomplished great feats in battle. The narrator gives more attention to Benaiah's feats, for he was held in such great honor that he was made the head of David's personal bodyguard. And he would become Solomon's general (1 Kgs. 1:38-40; 4:4).

**23:24-39** The chapter ends with a list of the men in David's bodyguard.

## F. David Displeases Yahweh by Taking a Census (24:1-25)

This final story shows that David, not Saul, was the rightful king because although David sinned, he took responsibility for his actions, repented, and submitted to the authority of Yahweh. David was also willing to intercede on behalf of the people and put himself in their place.

**24:1-2** Only once before in the books of Samuel is it said that “Yahweh’s anger burned against Israel” (2 Sam. 6:7). The narrator does not state what angered Yahweh. But elsewhere Yahweh’s anger burns because of sin (Ex. 32:10; Num. 11:3; 25:3; 32:13; Deut. 6:15; 7:4; 11:17; 29:7; Josh. 7:1; 23:16; Judg. 2:14, 20; 3:8; 10:7; 2 Kgs. 13:3; 23:26; Isa. 5:25).

As a result of Israel’s sin, Yahweh incited David to take a census to bring a judgment upon Israel. There are times in the Bible where Yahweh gives His people over to their own destructive sin as judgment against them (Rom. 1:24-32).

There is nothing wrong with a census in itself, for Yahweh commanded Israel to take a census in Num. 1 and 26 to determine the number of men available for military service. The problem with the census might be found in the fact that Joab’s route followed the nation’s border. It may have nothing to do with war, but David was seeking to usurp Yahweh’s authority over Israelite kings by initiating this when it was not needed.<sup>116</sup> Taking a census also mobilized the men to fight and required them to go through purity rituals and abstain from sex. The census also required the men to pay a ransom to Yahweh for their lives before they went to war (Ex. 30:11-16). If they did not, then a plague would break out against them. It is likely that David did not know this, and many did not do it, which brought the judgment of Yahweh’s plague on Israel.

**24:3-8** Joab questioned the motives of David and pointed David to Yahweh as the one who builds armies. Joab’s response is a surprising expression of faith. Generally, such expressions seem foreign to him, given his propensity for violence. But David’s position prevailed over Joab. Joab started in the extreme southeast and moved throughout land over a period of almost ten months.

**24:10** When the census was finished, David became convicted of his sin and repented of it before Yahweh. What is interesting here is even though David had repented of his sin many times in the past, this is the first time he is recorded repenting of his sin without someone confronting him first. 1 Sam. 12 provided clear limits to the king’s powers and rights, and David effectively confessed that he had transgressed them.

**24:11-14** Yahweh sent the prophet Gad to bring judgment upon David through one of three options from which David could pick. Each option was a short amount of time but increased in intensity. David chose the three days of a plague because it placed him in the merciful hands of Yahweh rather than the heartless and cruel hands of nature and men. Though David had sinned, he understood the true character of Yahweh and submitted to His authority, unlike Saul.

**24:15-17** So Yahweh sent a plague that started in the north and moved southward. When it got to Jerusalem, Yahweh had mercy on Israel and commanded the angel to stop. David, seeing the angel and not knowing it had relented, prayed to Yahweh and offered himself up in place of the people. As before, David spoke of his sin and his iniquity but distinguished himself from the people.

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<sup>116</sup> See David G. Firth. *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 541.

**24:18-19** Through the prophet Gad, Yahweh commanded David to build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. This threshing floor was on the northernmost peak of the hill on which Jerusalem was built and was north of David's palace. David obeyed Yahweh.

**24:20-23** David went to Araunah and offered to pay for the hill. David assumed that the altar was for restraining the plague—something Gad had not said but was a reasonable deduction. Araunah refused payment and offered it to David for free, but David insisted on paying for it because he refused to sacrifice to Yahweh something that had cost him nothing. David understood that a true sacrifice must cost you something (2 Cor. 8:1-15), that sacrifice without sacrifice is not a sacrifice. But David's statement here also shows that he knew he could not simply take from his people, whether Israelite or foreigner. That was not the role of Israel's king. David offered burnt offerings (Lev. 1), which was associated with making atonement and peace offerings (Lev. 3), a means of inviting community to share in worship. At this the plague stopped. Though David was flawed, this story shows that the more dominant part of David's character was in being man who sought to please Yahweh and submit himself to Yahweh's authority.

## Conclusion

The book of Judges ends with a sense of hopelessness—that there was no one righteous left in the nation of Israel. This longing for the redemption of Israel despite its darkness is hinted at in the repeating and final phrase, “In those days Israel had no king. Each man did what was right in his own eyes.” The only hope is in the coming of the Deuteronomic king (Deut. 17:14-20; Gen. 49:8-12) who could lead Israel back to Yahweh, their covenantal God.

Yet the prophet Samuel makes it clear that a human king is not what the book of Judges meant. Rather, it meant Israel was to acknowledge Yahweh as their true king if they wanted to have life and blessing in the land. Yet the people rejected Yahweh and demanded a king like all the other nations, so Yahweh gave them one.

The books of Samuel then tell the story of two kings who were both sinful and abused power and other people for their own gain. Both of their reigns continued to emphasize the point that Israel’s hope was not to be found in human leaders. Yet, despite David’s failures, the narrator does portray him as a godly king. Unlike Saul, David desired to know and obey Yahweh. In the midst of his sin, David always repented and resubmitted himself to the kingship of Yahweh. In this way, David was a righteous king and became the model Deuteronomic king for all the kings to follow.

The books of Samuel end with the tension that Israel’s hope cannot be found in human leaders but can be found in the model of David and the Davidic line. This is seen in the covenant that Yahweh made with David (2 Sam. 7) where He promised to continue David’s line forever as kings. This tension is resolved in the Davidic covenant, which leads to Jesus Christ as the God-man, who is in the line of David. As both human and the God-king, Jesus will become the greater Deuteronomic king.

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